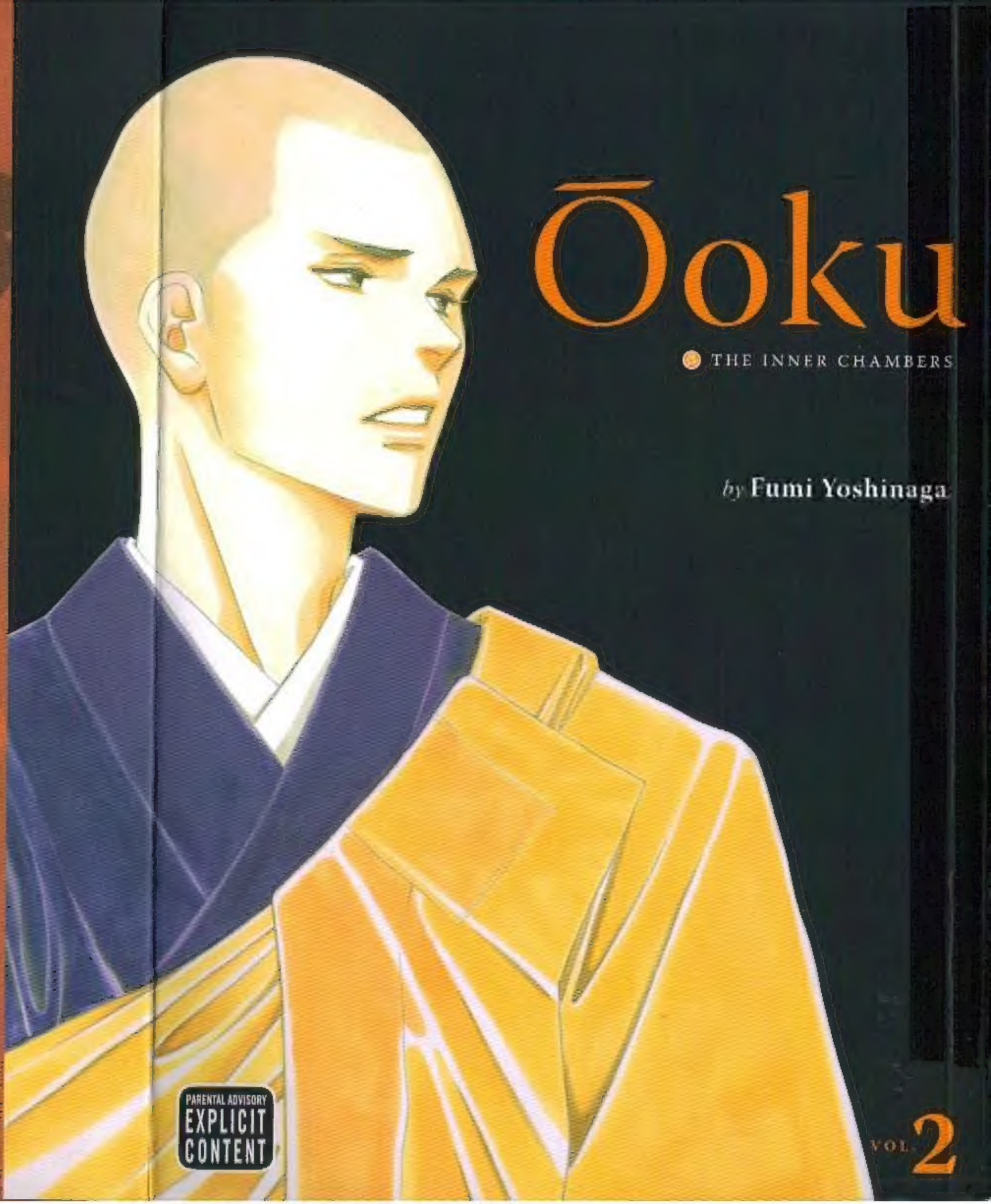
Ōoku

THE INNER CHAMBERS

by Fumi Yoshinaga



PARENTAL ADVISORY
EXPLICIT CONTENT

VOL. 2

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CURIOUS ABOUT WHY female lords must take on male names, the shogun Yoshimune seeks out the ancient scribe Murase and his archives of the last eighty years of the Inner Chambers--called the Chronicle of the Dying Day. In its pages Yoshimune discovers the coming of the Redface Pox, the death of the last male shogun, and the birth of the new Japan...

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In what was a male-dominated feudal society, Tokugawa Ieyasu—founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, a military dynasty that ruled from the city of Edo—was a man, as was his successor, Hidetada.

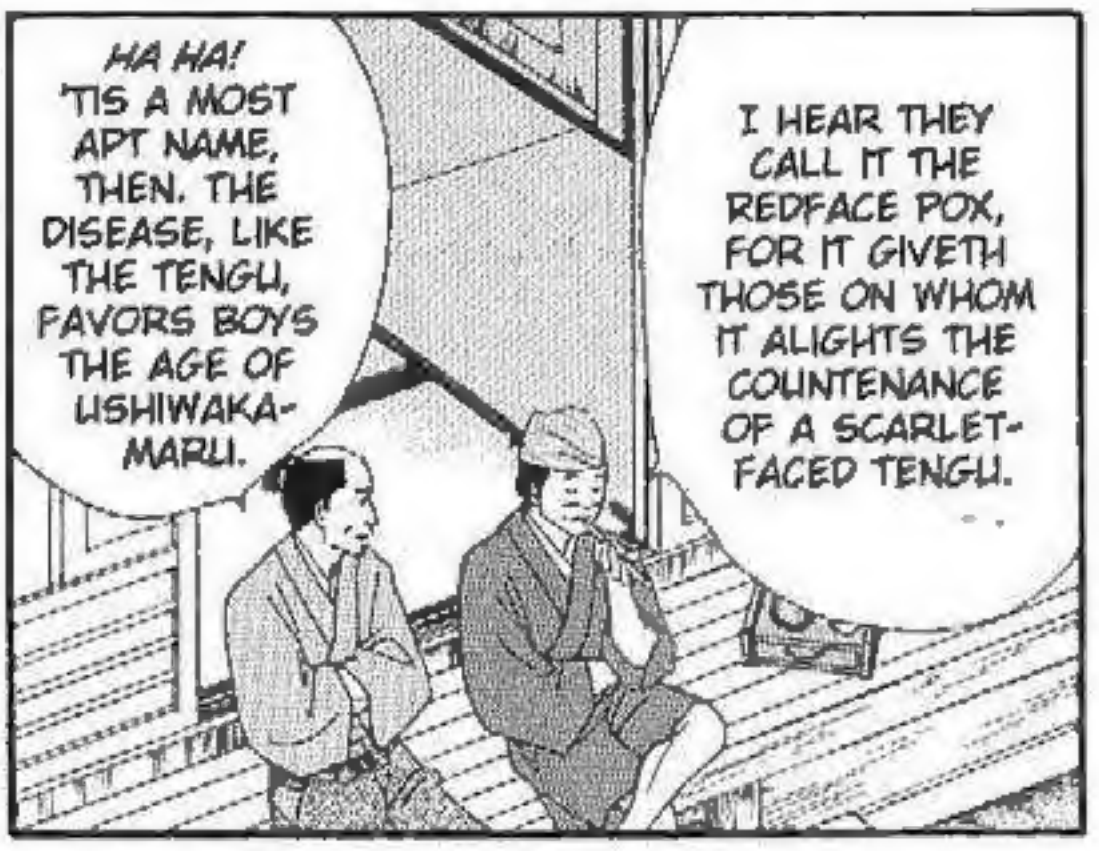
Until the early years of the Edo period, the ratio of men to women in Japan was perfectly normal.

A mysterious plague swept the city of Edo.

It was in the ninth year of Kan'ei (1632), precisely as the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu—also a man—was trying to solidify the foundations of his government's rule, that the cataclysm occurred.

AAAA

'TIS MOST STRANGE INDEED THAT ALL THOSE WHO TAKE ILL AND DIE ARE BOYS OF 14 AND 15...
NOW THE SICKNESS HATH TAKEN O-RUI'S SON, TOO.
WHEN FINALLY THE LONG YEARS OF WARFARE ARE O'ER AND WE HAVE SOME PEACE IN THIS LAND AT LAST, ALONG COMES A PLAGUE TO KILL US ALL. THE GODS HAVE MERCY!


HA HA! 'TIS A MOST APT NAME, THEN. THE DISEASE, LIKE THE TENGU, FAVORS BOYS THE AGE OF USHIWAKA-MARU.
I HEAR THEY CALL IT THE REDFACE POX, FOR IT GIVETH THOSE ON WHOM IT ALIGHTS THE COUNTENANCE OF A SCARLET-FACED TENGU.

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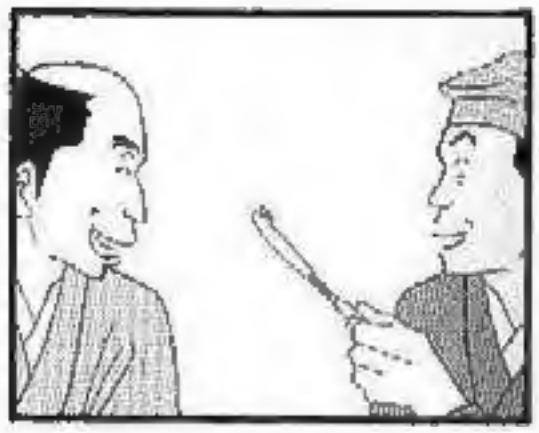
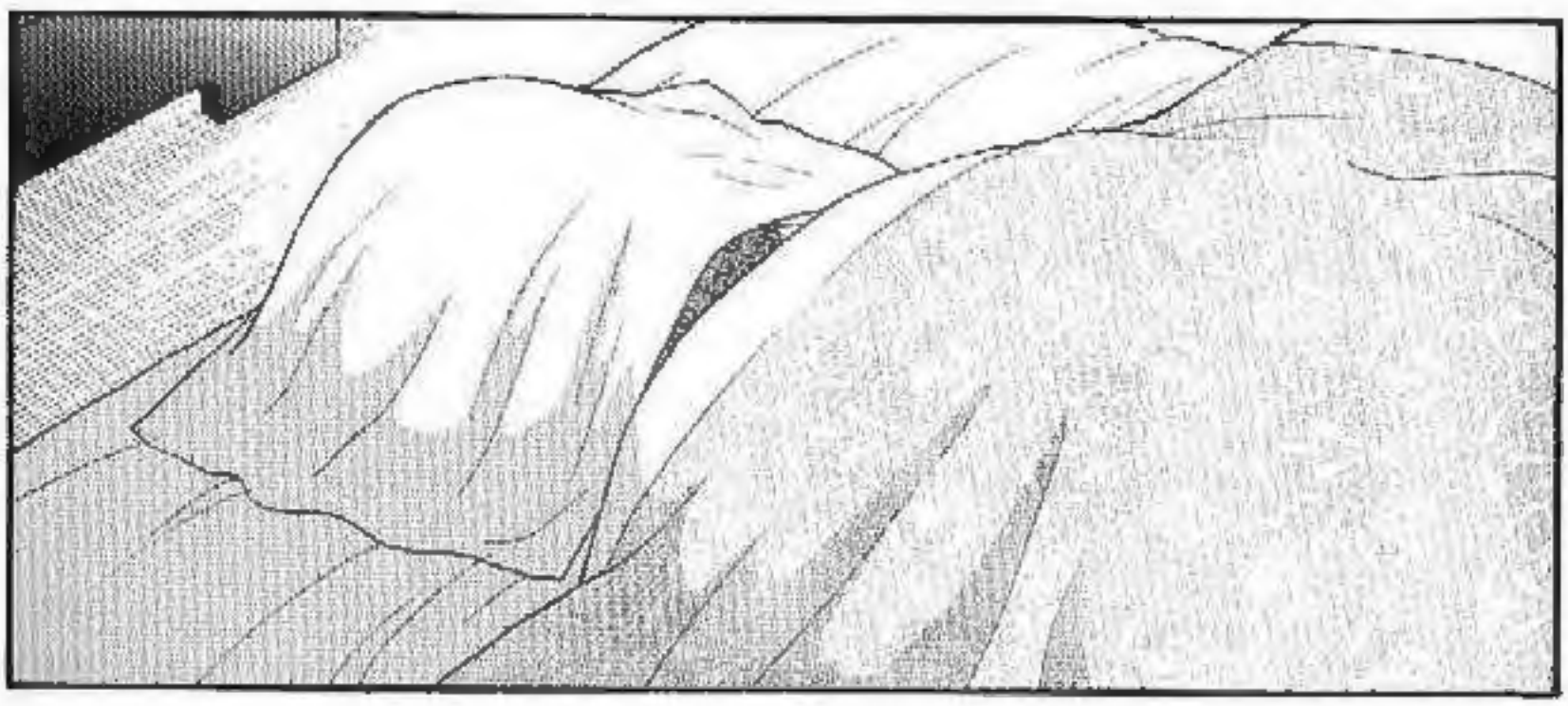
AND IT CANNOT BE THAT BOYS KEEP DYING UNTIL THERE ARE NONE LEFT.

...WELL.

'TIS A MOST TERRIBLE CONTAGION INDEED, BUT SURELY 'TWILL PASS. IS'T NOT A PLAGUE A PASSING THING, AFTER ALL? 'TIS NOT THE NORMAL STATE.



But the disease, while striking rich and poor, high and low alike, continued to attack young men only.



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...WE'LL HAVE MORE CHILDREN.

NO MATTER HOW MANY CHILDREN WE MIGHT HAVE, TERUTSUNA CAN NE'ER BE REPLACED!!

WHAT A THING TO SAY, SIR NOBUTSUNA!!

AND ANYWAY ...!!

WEEPEST THOU NOT! 'TIS UNSEEMLY IN A WOMAN OF A SAMURAI HOUSE!!

MMGH... TERUTSUNA...

E'EN SHOULD ANOTHER SON BE BORN TO US, HE TOO COULD FALL ILL WITH THIS REDFACE POX AND DIE!!

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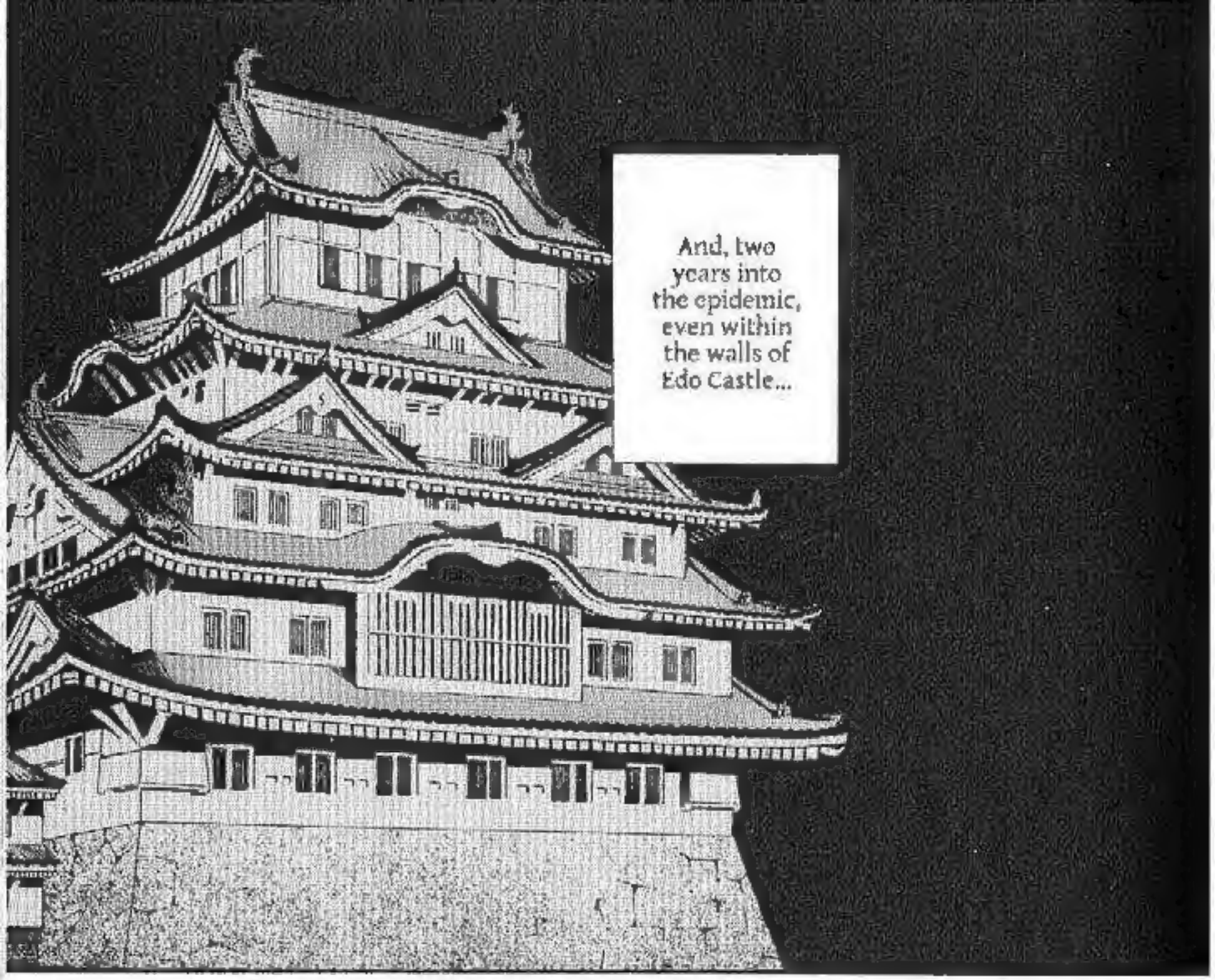

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OH...!! LADY KASUGA! HIS HIGHNESS IS...!!

HIS HIGH-NESS...

...OUR LIEGE, LORD IEMITSU, HATH BREATHED HIS LAST...!!

TWO

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...

RIDICULOUS.

...

WHUH?

WITH GREAT RESPECT, THE CURRENT CONTAGION IS NOT THE POX, BUT THE *REDFACE POX*, A DIFFERENT DISEASE.

'TIS NOT POSSIBLE. HIS HIGHNESS WAS STRUCK BY THE POX JUST SIX YEARS AGO, FROM WHICH HE DID RECOVER QUITE NICELY. 'TIS WELL KNOWN A PERSON CAN BE STRUCK ONLY ONCE BY THE POX, NEVER MORE!

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'TIS TRUE THAT IN THE MAJORITY OF SUCH CASES THE SYMPTOMS ARE NOT DEADLY, AND INDEED MILD. HOWEVER, OUR LIEGE WAS SINCE CHILDHOOD OF FRAIL HEALTH, AND—

NAY, IN SOOTH IT DOTH ON OCCASION STRIKE GROWN MEN AS WELL!

BUT THEY SAY THE REDFACE POX STRIKETH ONLY YOUNG MEN! YOUTHS! INDEED, BOYS!! HIS HIGHNESS IS ALREADY THIRTY-ONE YEARS OF AGE!

ENOUGH!!

'TIS YOUR NURSE, O-FUKU, HERE, YOUR HIGHNESS!! I BESEECH YOU TO ANSWER ME, MY LORD!!

MY LORD!!

KAWA

I HAVE HEARD ENOUGH OF THY NONSENSE!!

MOVE ASIDE, THOU QUACK!! YOUR HIGHNESS...! 'TIS I, KASUGA.. NAY, 'TIS YOUR O-FUKU HERE, MY LORD. I PRAY YOU, PLEASE, ANSWER ME!!

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Six years later

chrr

chrr

chrp

chrp

chrp

TUT, GYOKUEI!

PRIOR ARIKOTO, YOUR HONOR! EDO CASTLE HATH COME INTO VIEW!

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AY, SIR.

PRAY LOWER THE PALANQUIN FOR A MOMENT...

HA HA! 'TIS NO MATTER, MYOKEI. I ASKED GYOKUEI TO TELL ME WHEN EDO CASTLE COMETH INTO VIEW, AND HE HATH DONE SO.

OUR MASTER IS NO LONGER A PRIOR, HE IS NOW THE ABBOT HIMSELF! HOW MANY TIMES MUST I TELL THEE!

OOPS.

AH.

SO THAT IS EDO CASTLE, OF WHICH I HAVE HEARD SO MUCH.

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IS IT SO SPLENDID, VERILY? TO MINE EYES THIS GARISH STAGE PROPERTY CASTLE LOOKETH LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN A KANTO BUMPKIN'S ATTEMPT TO BE GRAND!

WELL, WELL, SO THAT IS THE RESIDENCE OF THE RULING TOKUGAWA CLAN. 'TIS QUITE A SPLENDID PALACE INDEED.

DO YOU DISLIKE THE SHOGUNATE, FRIAR MYOKEI?

I MOST CERTAINLY DO!

'TWOULD BE ONE THING IF OUR MASTER WERE SUMMONED TO THE IMPERIAL PALACE IN KYOTO TO REPORT HIS SUCCESSION AS HEAD OF KEIKO-IN TO THE MIKADO HIMSELF—THAT IS ONLY FITTING. BUT TO BE SUMMONED EAST TO EDO, A JOURNEY OF FOUR AND FIFTY DAYS, TO REPORT TO THE SHOGUN! THESE TOKUGAWA ARE GETTING TOO FAR ABOVE THEMSELVES!

AH, INDEED I HAVE. AND BECAUSE ONE WHO HATH NEITHER RANK NOR TITLE IS BARRED FROM ENTERING THE IMPERIAL COURT, THE TITLE OF KASUGA WAS BESTOWED UPON HER FOR'T BY THE MIKADO HIMSELF, WAS'T NOT?

INDEED, SURELY EVEN *THOU* HAST HEARD ABOUT THE PRETENSIONS OF THE CURRENT SHOGUN IEMITSU'S WET NURSE, A COMMONER NAMED O-FUKU OR SOME SUCH, WHO DARED TO ATTEND AN AUDIENCE WITH THE MIKADO?!

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YES, BUT THE MIKADO BANISHED HER NOT FROM HIS SIGHT, BUT INSTEAD BESTOWED UPON HER A COURT TITLE. IN SHORT, THE IMPERIAL COURT TODAY HATH NOT THE POWER TO OPPOSE THE TOKUGAWA CLAN. IS THAT NOT WHAT IT MEANS?

A WOMAN WHOSE FATHER WAS A MERE SAMURAI RETAINER, DARING TO PRESENT HERSELF TO THE IMPERIAL COURT AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SHOGUN, SHELTERING UNDER THE MIGHT OF THE WARRIOR CLASS TO GAZE SHAMELESSLY UPON THE HALLOWED MIKADO HIMSELF! SUCH IMPUDENCE! SUCH BRAZEN IMPERTINENCE!

TOUCHÉ, MYOKEI.

FOR THE WEAK TO SUBMIT TO THE STRONG IS THE WAY OF NATURE AND OF THE WORLD. I CAN FIND NO FAULT WITH THE TOKUGAWA IN THIS INSTANCE.

I WANT ONLY THAT THOU BE AWARE OF'T.

VERY WELL.

I-INDEED, YOUR GRACE. I BEG YOUR PARDON.

FOR ONE WHO SERVES THE LORD BUDDHA TO SPEAK ILL OF OTHERS SO CONTEMPTUOUSLY, WHOSOEVER THEY MIGHT BE, IS NOT RIGHT. DOST THOU NOT AGREE?

BUT THAT WAS ENOUGH ARGUMENT, BRETHREN.

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A MONK'S WORK IS TO GIVE SUCCOR TO THESE VERY FOLK— THE WEAK, THE POWERLESS, THE POOR AND THE HUNGRY.

BUT THY WAY OF THINKING, GYOKUEI, IS MORE LIKE THAT OF A MILITARY COMMANDER THAN THAT OF A BUDDHIST FRIAR.

ON OUR JOURNEY FROM KYOTO TO EDO, WE HAVE SEEN A GREAT MANY PEOPLE, HAVE WE NOT?

AND THOU, GYOKUEI.

MANY OF THEM WERE POOR, AND JUST AS MANY SUFFERED FROM ILLNESS...ALL OF THEM WERE THE WEAK OF THIS WORLD THAT THOU HAST JUST MENTIONED.

THOU ART A RIGHT CLEVER LAD, SO THOU GRASPEST THE INNER WORKINGS OF THIS WORLD MORE QUICKLY THAN OTHERS. IT FOLLOWS THAT THOU CANNOT HELP BUT BE A WEE BIT MORE WORLDLY THAN A MONK OUGHT TO BE

A *WEE* BIT, YOUR GRACE? 'TIS A GOOD BIT MORE THAN A WEE BIT!

I...I BEG PARDON.

I SHOULD NEED NO REMINDING, WHEN I MYSELF WAS A POOR, DIRTY ORPHAN COVERED WITH LICE AND SCABS, WHO WAS RAISED FROM THE GUTTER BY YOUR GRACE...

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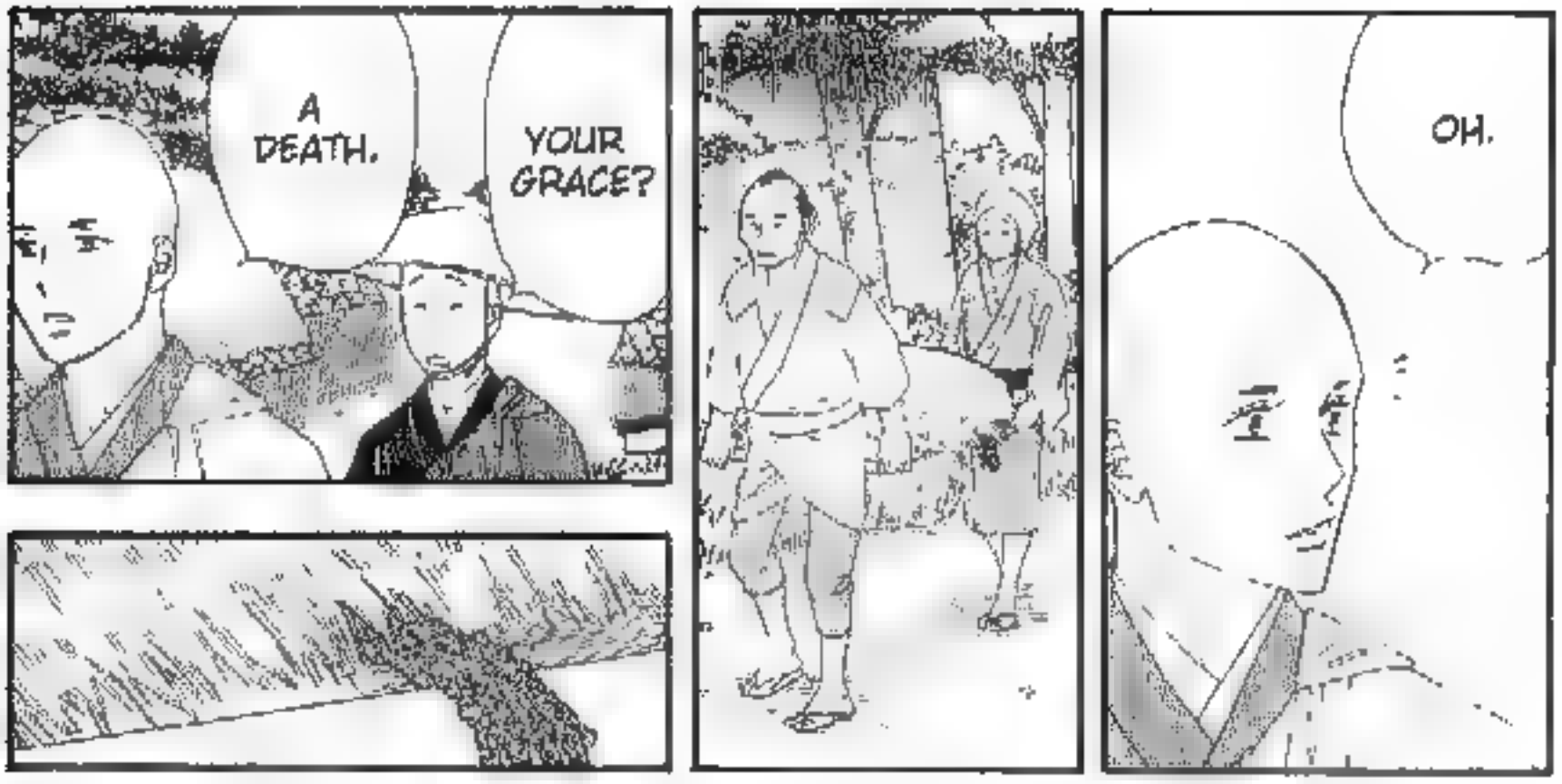

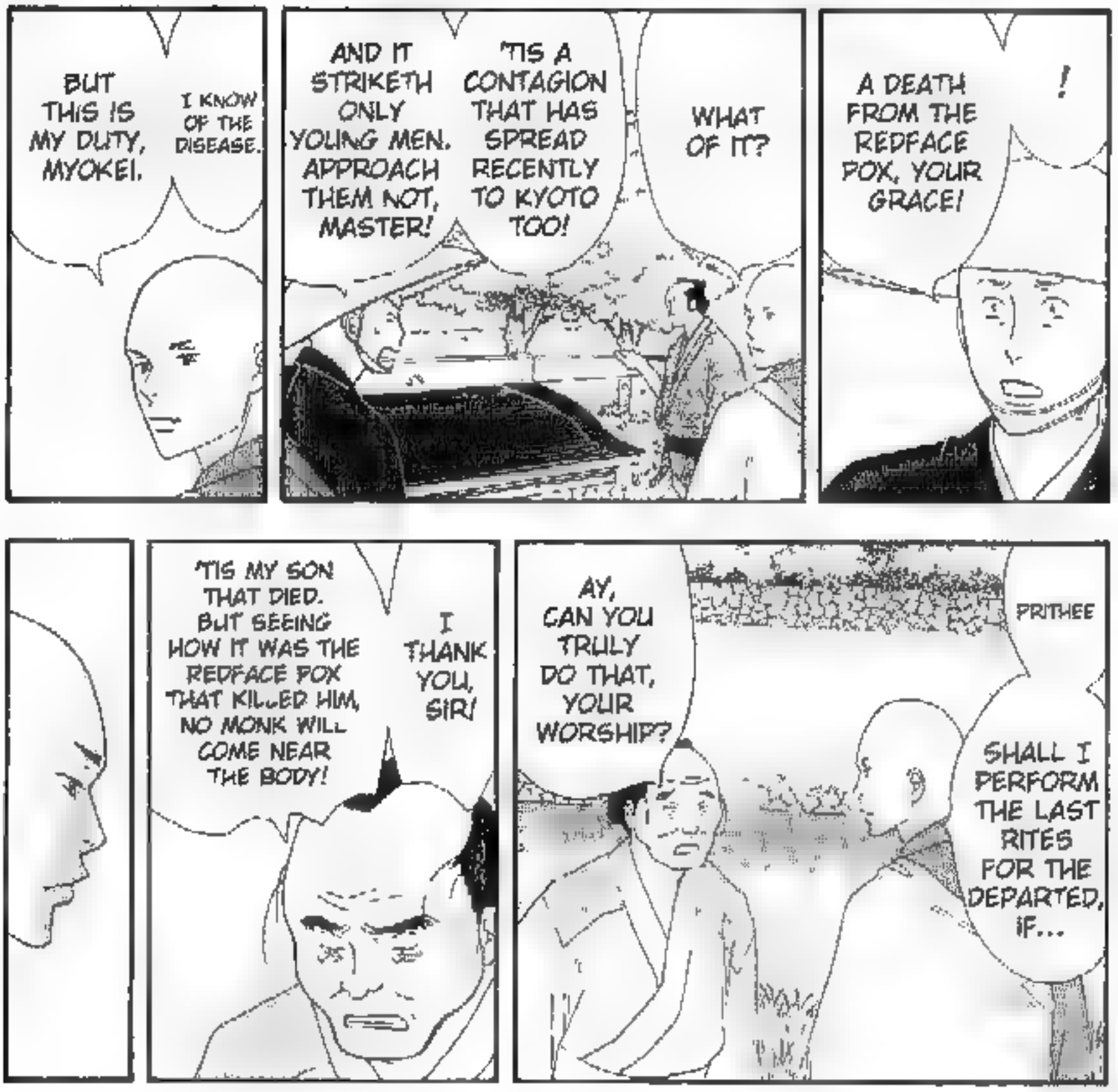
BUT THIS IS MY DUTY, MYOKEI.
I KNOW OF THE DISEASE.
AND IT STRIKETH ONLY YOUNG MEN. APPROACH THEM NOT, MASTER!
'TIS A CONTAGION THAT HAS SPREAD RECENTLY TO KYOTO TOO!
WHAT OF IT?
A DEATH FROM THE REDFACE POX, YOUR GRACE!
!
'TIS MY SON THAT DIED. BUT SEEING HOW IT WAS THE REDFACE FOX THAT KILLED HIM, NO MONK WILL COME NEAR THE BODY!
I THANK YOU, SIR!
AY, CAN YOU TRULY DO THAT, YOUR WORSHIP?
PRITHEE
SHALL I PERFORM THE LAST RITES FOR THE DEPARTED, IF...

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I THANK YOU MOST KINDLY, YOUR WORSHIP, SIR...

OH.

THOU, LASS! SAY SOME WORDS OF GRATITUDE TO HIS WORSHIP!

WELL, THEN.

'TIS TERRIBLE..

A GREAT MANY MAIDS IN EDO HAVE MET HIM TOO, AND HAD THE SAME DONE TO THEM. 'TIS THOUGHT TO BE THE WORK OF ONE MAN

A STREET SLASHER?

SHE'S MY OWN DAUGHTER, BUT I DO PITY HER, FOR SHE MET A STREET SLASHER.

I BEG PARDON FOR HER UNSIGHTLY HAIR. 'TIS A DISGRACE, I KNOW.

OH..NAY... YOUR WORSHIP...

BLUSH

AYE, 'TIS INDEED A MOST UNFORTUNATE MISHAP TO BEAR, WHEN THY HEART IS ALREADY HEAVY WITH SORROW FOR THY BROTHER.

I DARESAY THAT FOR HIM 'TIS BUT A SPORT, BUT FOR THE LASSES 'TIS A TERRIBLE FATE, A WRETCHED SHAME AND A MOST SORE PITY.

AY. 'TIS A SWORD-BEARING MAN OF THE WARRIOR CLASS, WHO STRIDES THE STREETS AT NIGHT AND HACKS OFF THE HAIR OF PASSING MAIDENS, AS IF TESTING THE SHARPNESS OF HIS BLADE.

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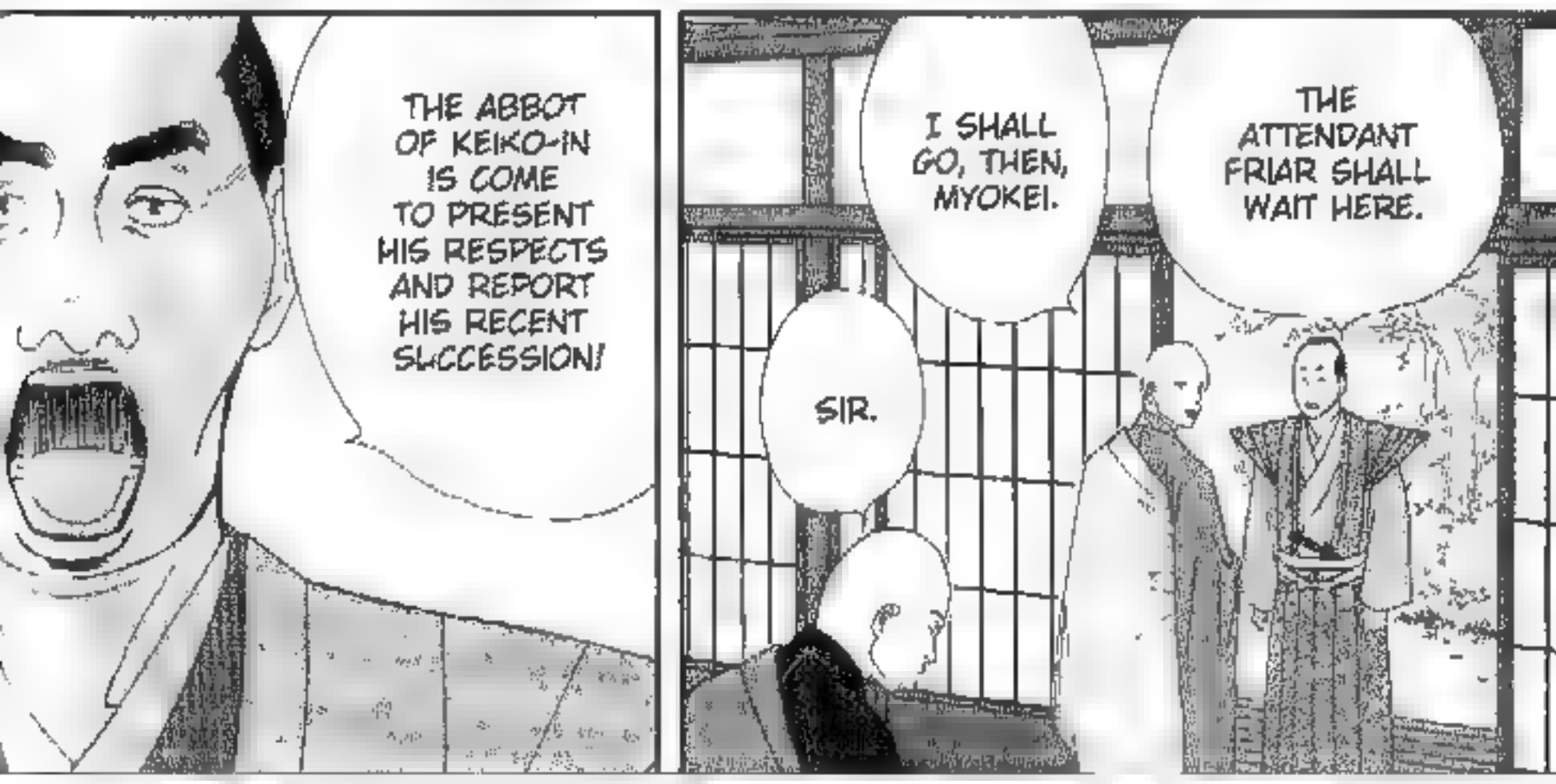
HE DOTH REMAIN BLISSFULLY UNAWARE THAT EVEN WITH THE SHAVEN PATE OF A MONK HE REMAINS A RIGHT HANDSOME MAN...
ALACK, O MASTER, ALACK...
If he were aware, he'd be a real ladykiller.

The next day, accompanied by Myokei only, the new abbot of Keiko-in presented himself at Edo Castle.


THE ABBOT OF KEIKO-IN IS COME TO PRESENT HIS RESPECTS AND REPORT HIS RECENT SUCCESSION!
I SHALL GO, THEN, MYOKEI.
SIR.
THE ATTENDANT FRIAR SHALL WAIT HERE.

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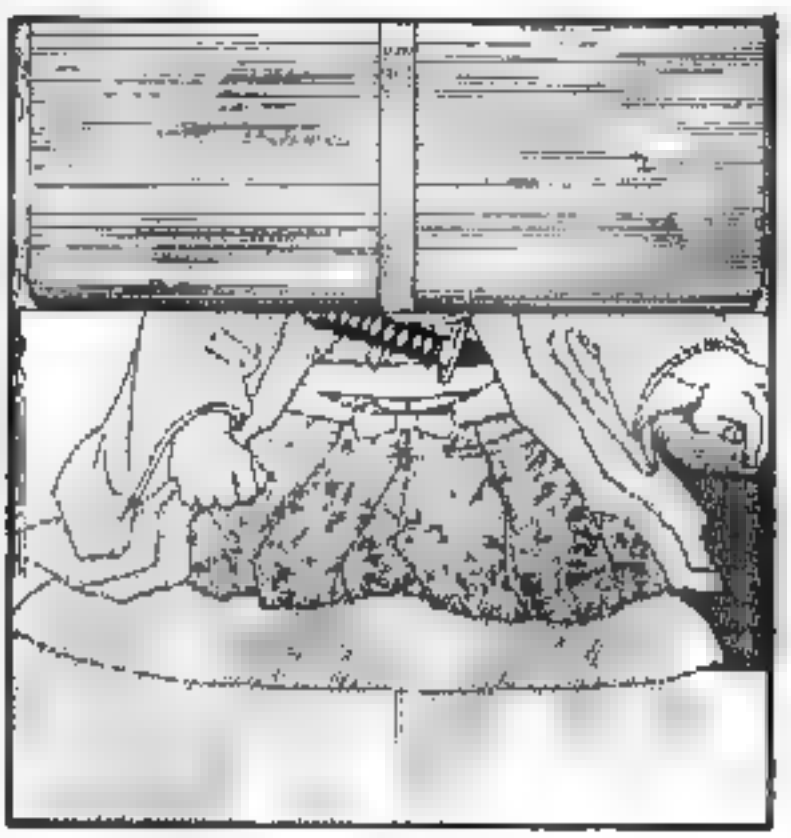
I HAVE COME TODAY TO PAY MY RESPECTS IN THIS CAPACITY, AND TO EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE FOR BEING PERMITTED THE MANTLE OF THIS ILLUSTRIOUS POSITION.

I AM THE SON OF MADENOKOJI ARIZUMI AND THE NEW ABBOT OF KEIKO-IN.

THIS MONK IS AS PRETTY AS A WOMAN...

WHAT A FINE FACE HE HATH!

REGARD..!



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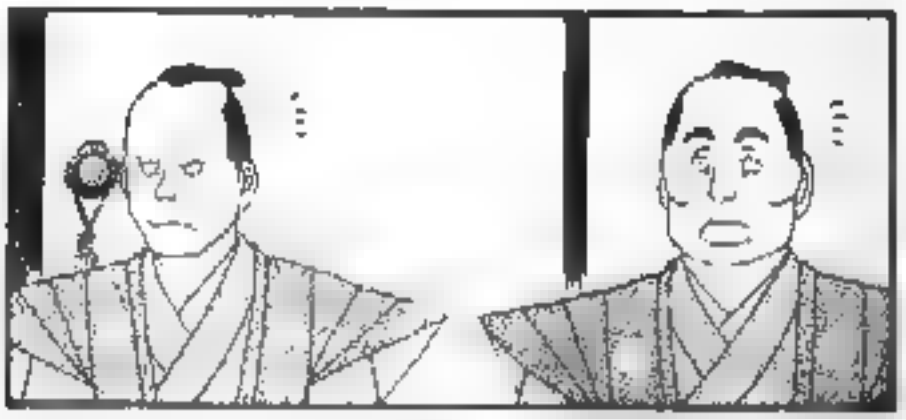
I THANK YOU MOST GRATEFULLY FOR THE KIND INVITATION, BUT MUST WITH REGRET BEG YOUR PARDON.
THEN SOJOURN AWHILE HERE IN EDO AND SEE THE SIGHTS.



GIVEN MY INEXPERIENCE AND NEWNESS TO THE POST, I STILL HAVE MUCH TO LEARN, AND TO LINGER IN EDO TO ENJOY THE SIGHTS WOULD NOT BE MEET. I INTEND THEREFORE TO DEPART IN A DAY OR TWO, BY YOUR LEAVE.
I HAVE JUST ASSUMED THE POST OF ABBOT AT KEIKO-IN AND HAVE MANY DUTIES THERE I MUST CARRY OUT, FOR WHICH REASON I MUST HASTEN BACK TO KYOTO.

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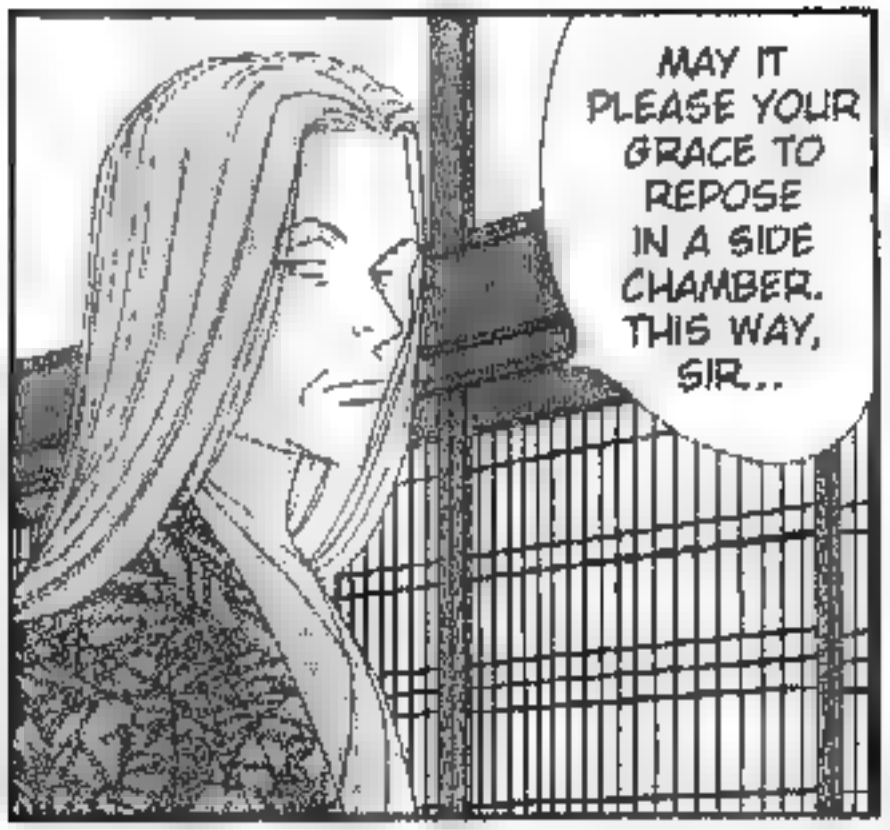

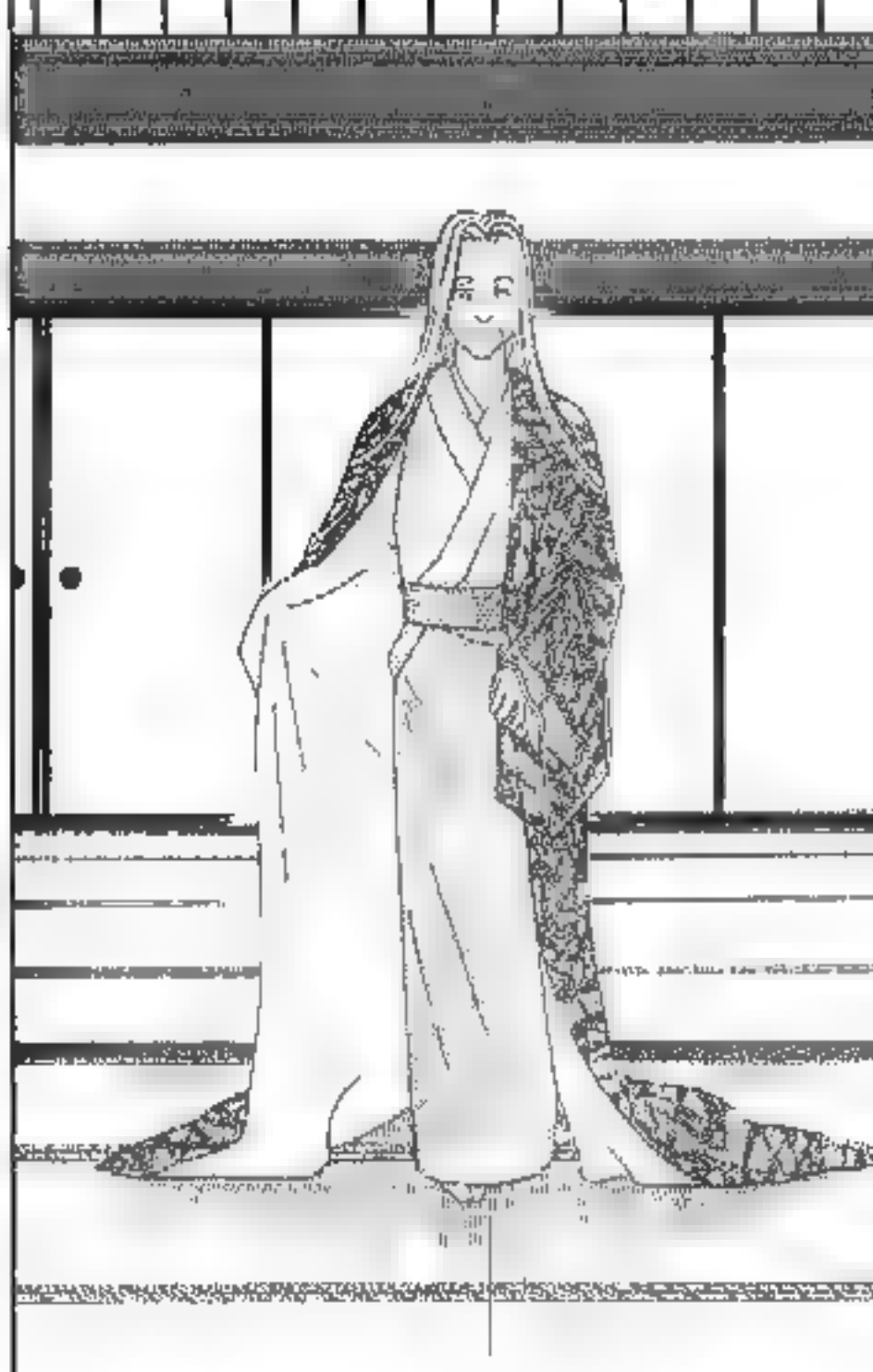

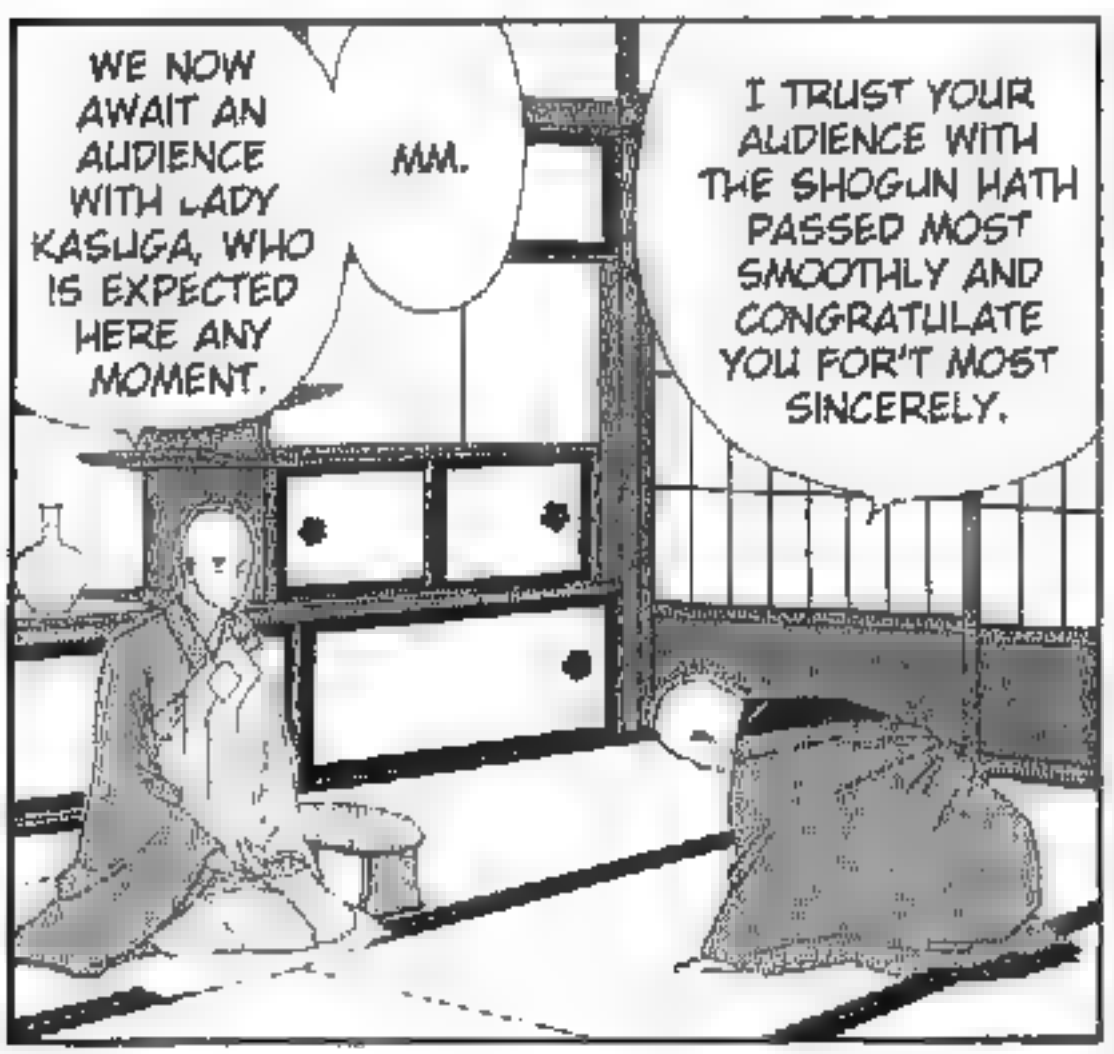
WE NOW AWAIT AN AUDIENCE WITH LADY KASUGA, WHO IS EXPECTED HERE ANY MOMENT.
MM.
I TRUST YOUR AUDIENCE WITH THE SHOGUN HATH PASSED MOST SMOOTHLY AND CONGRATULATE YOU FOR'T MOST SINCERELY.

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NAY.

HER DRESS WAS ALMOST SURPRISINGLY SIMPLE AND INDEED MODEST.

I EXPECT SHE WAS MOST OSTENTATIOUSLY GARBED IN BROCADED ROBES, WAS SHE NOT?

I HAVE HEARD THAT, THOUGH SHE BE BUT LORD IEMITSU'S WET NURSE, LADY KASUGA WIELDS AS MUCH INFLUENCE IN EDO CASTLE AS IF SHE WERE THE SHOGUN'S MOTHER HERSELF — FOR LORD IEMITSU WAS ON BAD TERMS WITH HIS BIRTH MOTHER, WHO IS ANYWAY NOW DEAD. INDEED, I HEAR THEY CALL THIS NURSE THE *REVEREND* KASUGA!

LADY KASUGA?!

THE REVEREND KASUGA IS COME TO SEE YOU, MY LORD.

MYOKEI, I SEE THY DISLIKE OF THE TOKUGAWA IS INDEED CONSIDERABLE...

HMPH! 'TIS A WOMAN OF THE BARBARIC EASTERN PROVINCES. WHAT SHE HATH IN GOLD AND RICHES APLENTY, SHE IS LACKING IN TASTE AND REFINEMENT SHE SIMPLY KNOWETH NOT WHAT IS FINE OR ELEGANT!

I AM KASUGA, SENIOR CHAMBERLAIN OF THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE. I AM PLEASED TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE

PARDON, I DID NOT INTRODUCE MYSELF EARLIER.

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SMILE

BUT 'TIS NOT ONLY YOUR COUNTENANCE, FOR YOUR NOBLE LINEAGE IS EVIDENT IN EVERY ASPECT OF YOUR BEARING, WHICH HAS A GENTILITY THAT WE OF THE WARRIOR CLASS DO LACK! TRULY, THIS OLD WOMAN COULD NOT HELP BUT GAZE IN ADMIRATION!

OHOHOHOHO

BY MY TROTH! YOU HAVE SO FINE AND BEAUTEOUS A COUNTENANCE!

AND ITS WOMENFOLK ARE MOST INDUSTRIOUS. I DID REMARK HOW HARD AND WELL THEY WORK.

AH, NAY, 'TIS NOT THAT EDO PLEASES ME NOT. FROM WHAT I HAVE GLIMPSED FROM MY PALANQUIN, 'TIS A MOST LIVELY GOOD CITY INDEED.

WHAT A GREAT PITY THAT YOU MUST DEPART SO SOON... DOTH EDO NOT PLEASE YOUR GRACE?

IF THAT BE SO, THEN YOUR GRACE SHALL NOT BE UNHAPPY TO SOJOURN AWHILE HERE IN EDO, AS OUR LIEGE LORD THE SHOGUN DOTH DESIRE.

I AM WELL RELIEVED TO HEAR IT.

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SUCH A BOLD AND RESOLUTE RESPONSE YOU MADE TO THE INVITATION FROM HIS HIGHNESS! NO SYCOPHANCY OR BLANDISHMENTS AS IS THE WONT OF SO MANY, BUT A STRAIGHTFORWARD REFUSAL, WHICH DID INDEED MAKE A GOOD AND REFRESHING IMPRESSION UPON MY LORD.

WHAT?!

I BESEECH YOU, YOUR GRACE, MOST HUMBLY AND SINCERELY, TO REMAIN IN EDO AS A GUEST OF THE TOKUGAWA FAMILY!

INDEED, I QUITE UNDERSTAND YOUR HASTE TO DEPART, BUT IF YOU WOULD HONOR THE EXPRESS WISH OF HIS HIGHNESS THE SHOGUN!

INDEED, I TOO HAVE BEEN MUCH IMPRESSED BY THE WISDOM OF YOUR GRACE, EVEN DURING OUR TRULY SHORT ACQUAINTANCE THUS FAR!

'TIS MOST IN KEEPING WITH ALL I HAVE HEARD ABOUT YOUR GRACE, FOR YOUR PRODIGIOUS INTELLECT IS RENOWNED. I DOUBT NOT WHAT THEY SAY, THAT YOU HAD MASTERED THREE OF THE FOUR BOOKS ALREADY AS A YOUNG BOY.

...I CANNOT STAY!

I...BUT, NAY... I CANNOT TARRY IN EDO...

I MUST HASTEN BACK TO KEIKO-IN AND TAKE UP MY DUTIES AS THE NEW ABBOT. EACH DAY AWAY FROM THE MONASTERY KEEPS ME AWAY FROM MY OFFICE.

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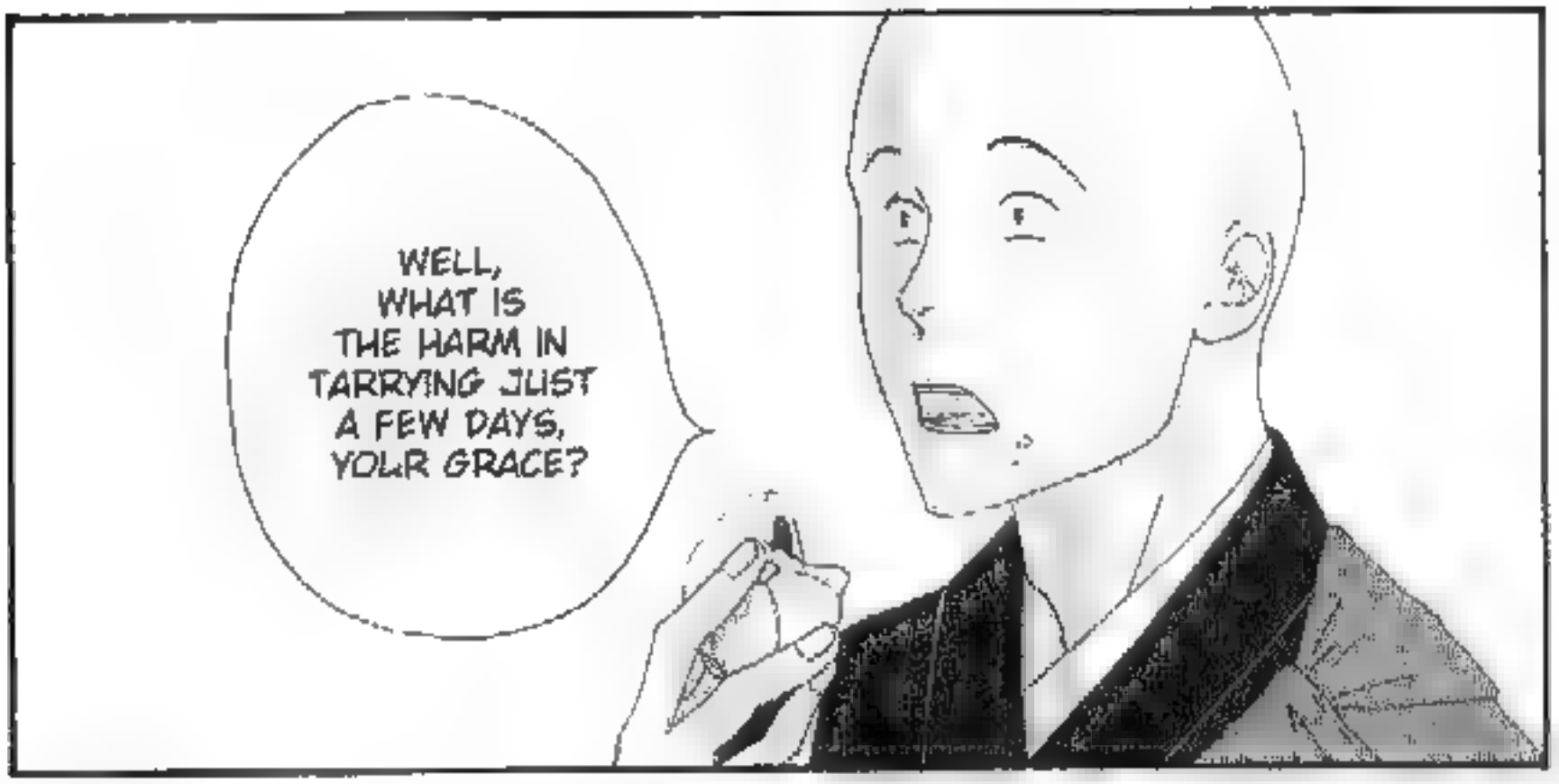

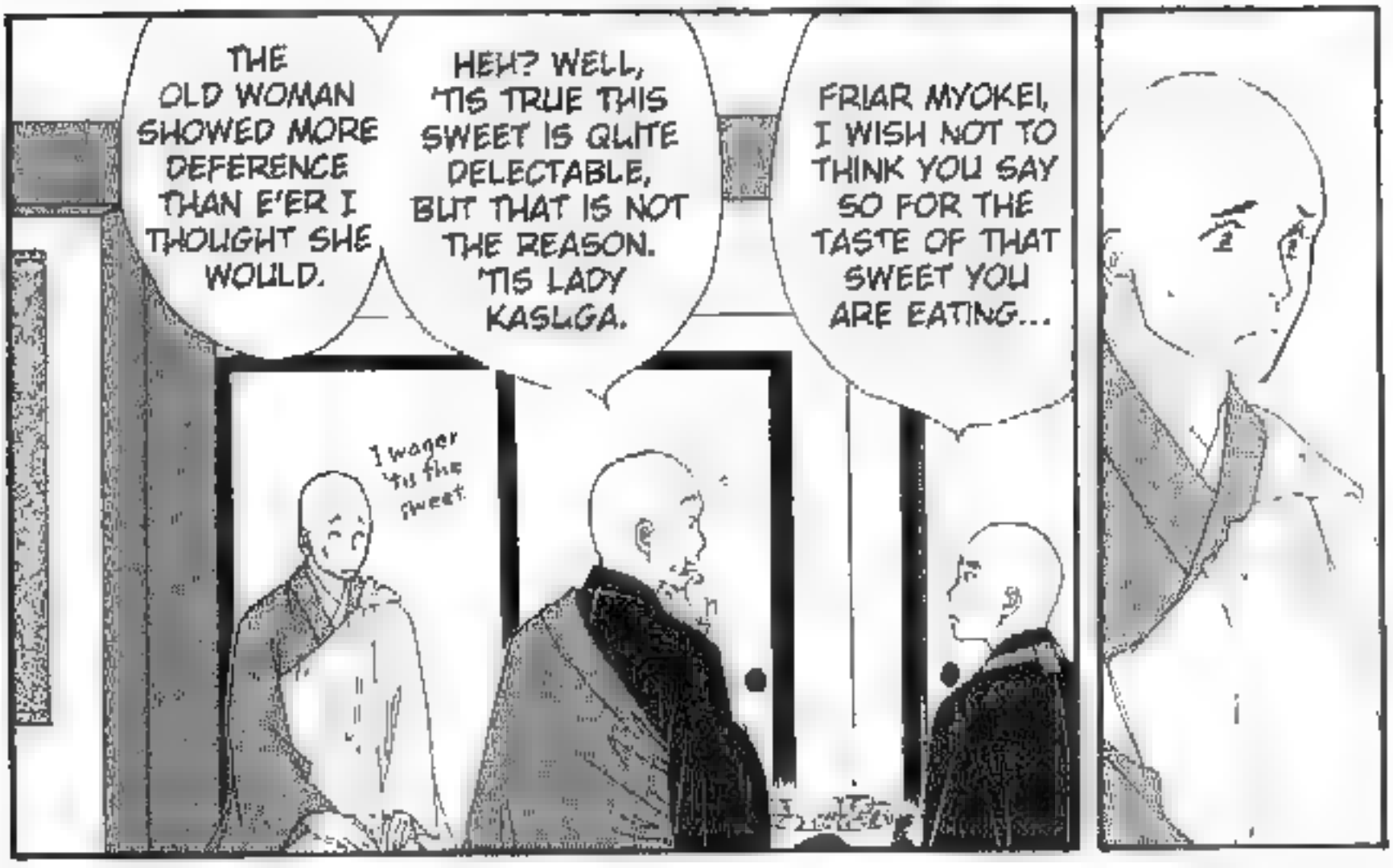
THE OLD WOMAN SHOWED MORE DEFERENCE THAN E'ER I THOUGHT SHE WOULD.
HEH? WELL, 'TIS TRUE THIS SWEET IS QUITE DELECTABLE, BUT THAT IS NOT THE REASON. 'TIS LADY KASUGA.
FRIAR MYOKEI, I WISH NOT TO THINK YOU SAY SO FOR THE TASTE OF THAT SWEET YOU ARE EATING...
I wager 'tis the sweet

YOUR GRACE.
I DARESAY THE HUMBLE PROVINCIAL WAS AWESTRUCK BY THE NOBLE MIEN OF OUR HIGH-BORN MASTER!
AS THE SENIOR CHAMBERLAIN OF THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE, I EXPECT SHE IS HIGH AND MIGHTY INDEED, GIVING ORDERS RIGHT AND LEFT. AND YET, TO OUR MASTER THE ABBOT, SHE PUT HER FOREHEAD TO THE FLOOR...AH, 'TWAS A FINE SIGHT!

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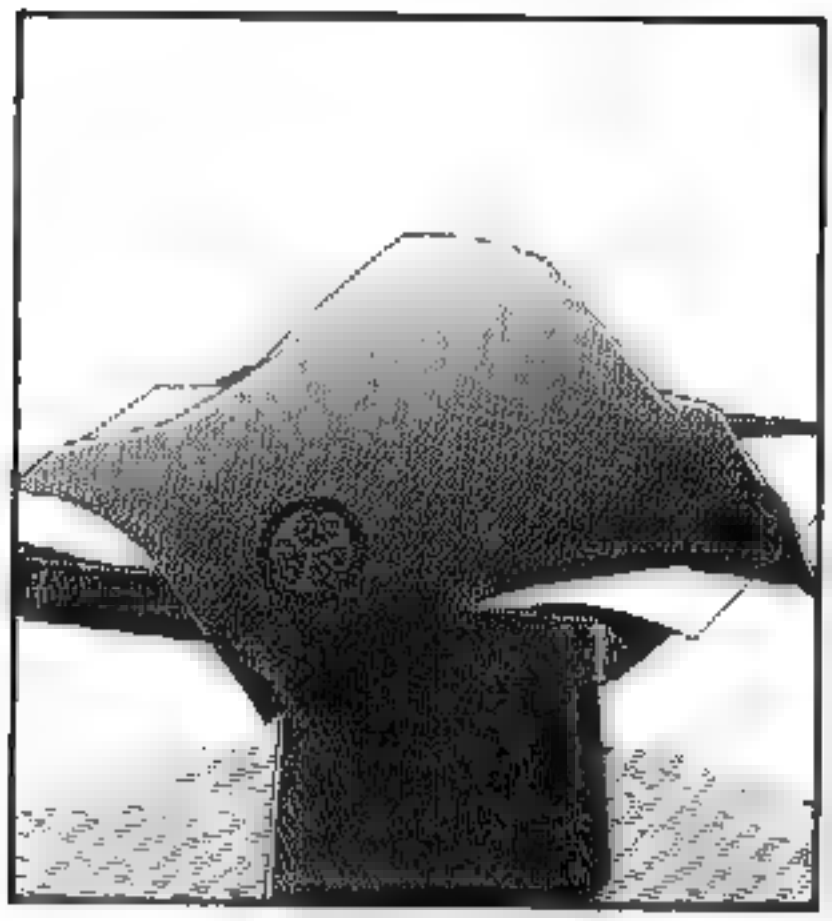

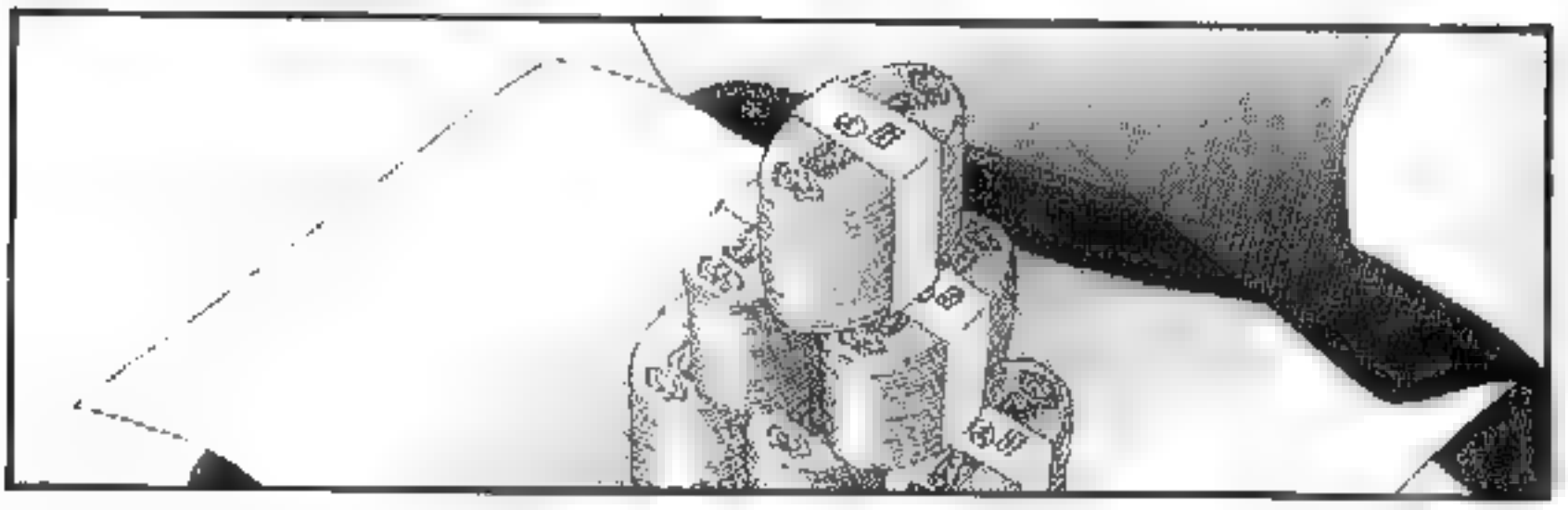

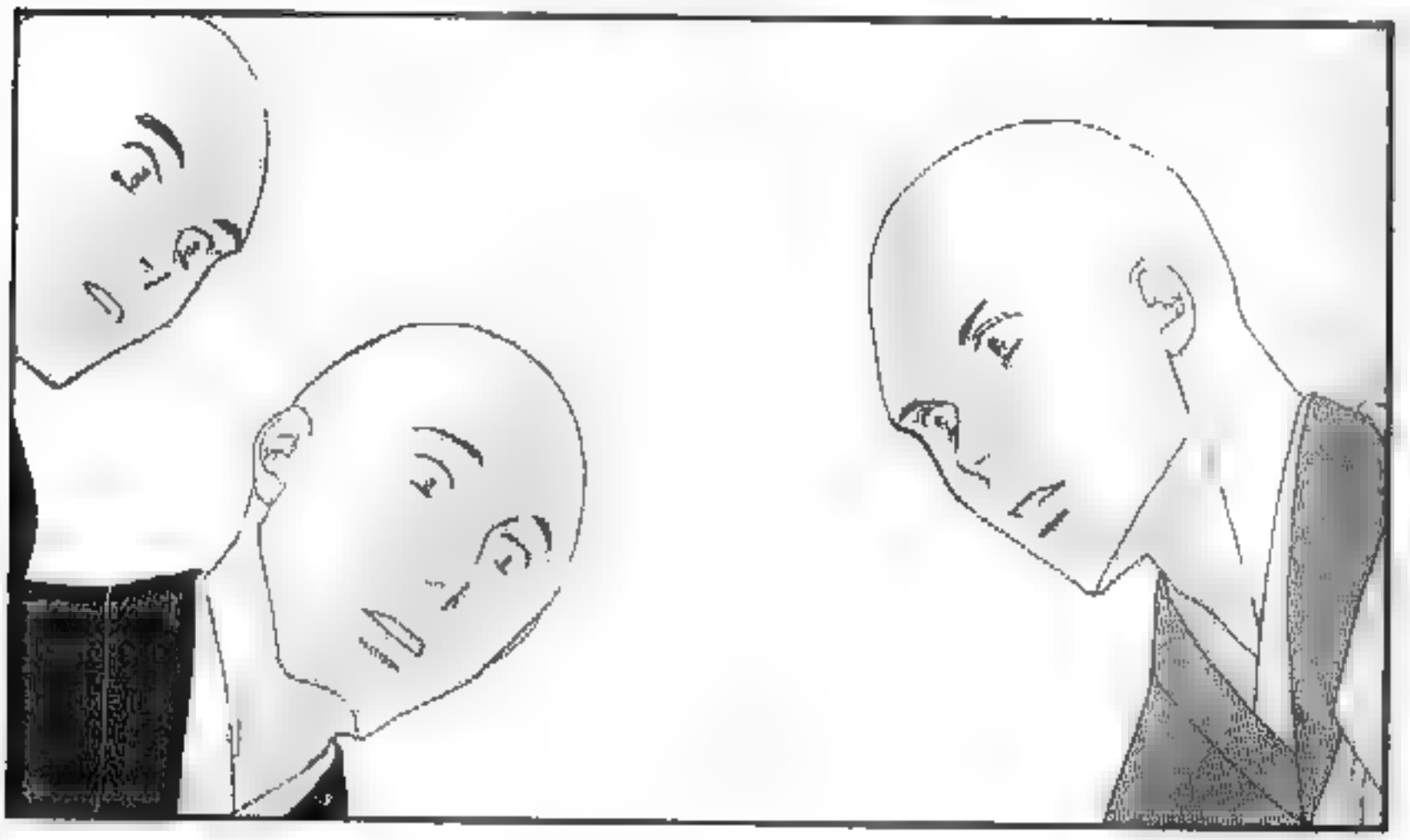

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I KNOW NOT. I WAS TOLD ONLY THAT HIS HIGHNESS DOTH DESIRE THAT YOU ACCEPT IT.

HM

WHAT IS THIS?! I HAVE ALREADY RECEIVED A GIFT FROM THE SHOGUN IN CELEBRATION OF MY SUCCESSION.

AYE!

THOU ART RIGHT, MYOKEI. I SHALL ACCEPT IT!

HMM..

WELL, WELL, YOUR GRACE. I DO BELIEVE THE LORD SHOGUN IS A MOST PIOUS SOUL. 'TIS A RIGHT GOOD THING, IS'T NOT?

AND FOR THAT, I CANNOT DENY THAT GOLD IS MOST USEFUL. I SHALL THEREFORE GRATEFULLY ACCEPT IT.

IF I ONLY STAY IN THE MONASTERY CLAD IN SILKEN ROBES AND CHANTING SUTRAS, I CANNOT GIVE SUCCOR TO FOLK IN NEED. I DO BELIEVE THAT HELPING THE LIVES OF THE POOR HERE IN THIS WORLD NOW MUST COME FIRST, ERE TALK OF SAVING THEIR SOULS.

I SEE... THAT MY MASTER DOTH HAVE GREAT AMBITIONS FOR HIS DOMAIN, LIKE ANY LORD.

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I WISH TO PAY MY RESPECTS AT ZOJO-JI AND UENO TOSHO-GU. THIS IS SOMETHING I WOULD DO WHILE IN EDO ANYWAY AND INDEED HAD PLANNED ERE LEAVING KEIKO-IN.

NAY, SIR, YOU MAY NOT!!

chrp chrp chrp

WHITHER ARE YOU THINKING TO GO, YOUR GRACE?

HIS HIGHNESS HATH THEREFORE COMMANDED THAT YOU REFRAIN FROM LEAVING THESE PREMISES.

EDO HAS BEEN VISITED IN LATTER DAYS BY THE REDFACE POX, A CONTAGION THAT AFFLICTS YOUNG MEN.

WITH RESPECT, I AM AFRAID IT DOES!

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?! SURELY WHEN THE SHOGUN SAYETH, SOJOURN AWHILE HERE IN EDO AND SEE THE SIGHTS, THAT DOTH NOT MEAN HIS GRACE IS TO SIT ON HIS HANDS IN THIS MANSION AND GAZE AT ITS WALLS!

HEY!!

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FURTHER ORDERS WILL BE FORTHCOMING FROM HIS HIGHNESS THE SHOGUN, IF IT PLEASE YOUR GRACE TO AWAIT THEM!

...PRAY EXPLAIN THE MEANING OF THIS. WHEREFORE AM I DETAINED IN EDO?

SSH! LOWER YOUR VOICE, SIR. .! I WISH NOT THAT OUR MASTER OVERHEAR US, AND HE IS JUST ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT WALL!

YOU HAVE HEARD MENTIONED THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE, FRIAR MYOKEI. DO YOU KNOW WHAT SORT OF PLACE IT IS?

WHAT...WHAT COULD THIS ALL MEAN, GYOKUEI...?

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WELL, THERE IS A STRANGE RUMOR CIRCULATING ABOUT IT IN RECENT YEARS.

AYE...THAT IS, I THINK I DO. 'TIS THE WOMEN'S QUARTERS, IS'T NOT? WHERE THEY KEEP THE WOMEN WHO SERVE THE SHOGUN...

IT CANNOT BE...!

!

'TIS SAID THAT THE INNER CHAMBERS ARE, IN SOOTH, POPULATED BY YOUTHS, NOT LADIES...

'TIS WELL KNOWN THAT THE SHOGUN, LORD IEMITSU, FAVORS YOUTHS OVER MAIDENS IN HIS BEDCHAMBER. THEY SAY 'TIS FOR THAT REASON THAT LADY KASUGA IS STOCKING THE INNER CHAMBERS WITH BEAUTEOUS YOUNG MEN TO SERVE THE SHOGUN AS HIS CATAMITES.

AND WHEREFORE DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

WHAAT?!

...THAT IS WHY WE ARE KEPT HERE, BUT...

I WISH NOT TO THINK...

OUR MASTER IS BLESSED WITH SUCH PHYSICAL PERFECTION AS TO MAKE HIM STAND OUT AMONG THE NOBLES OF THE IMPERIAL COURT. HERE, AMONG THE ROUGH, UNRULY WARRIORS OF EDO, HE IS LIKE A LOTUS ARISING FROM A FIELD OF MUD.

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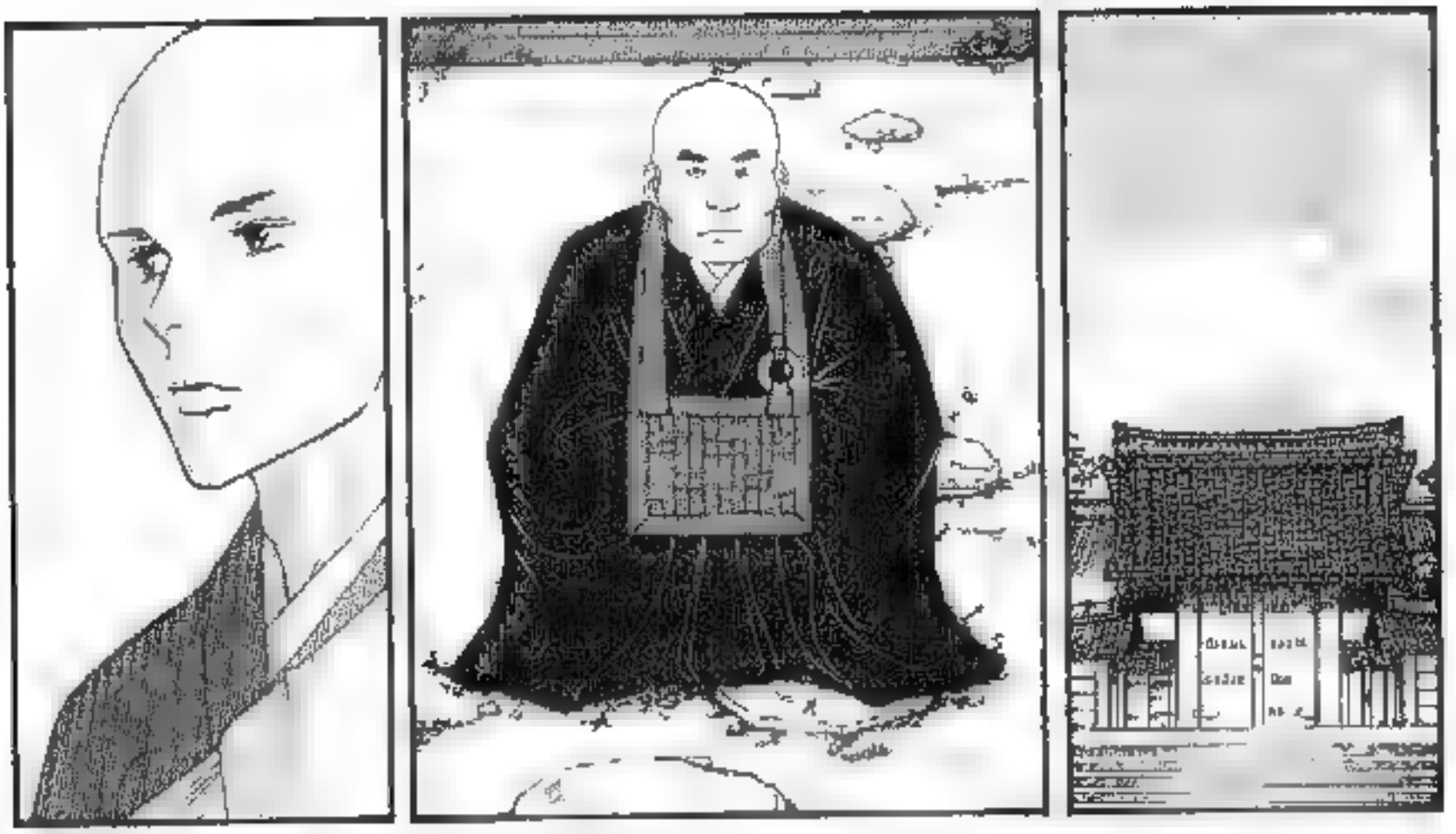

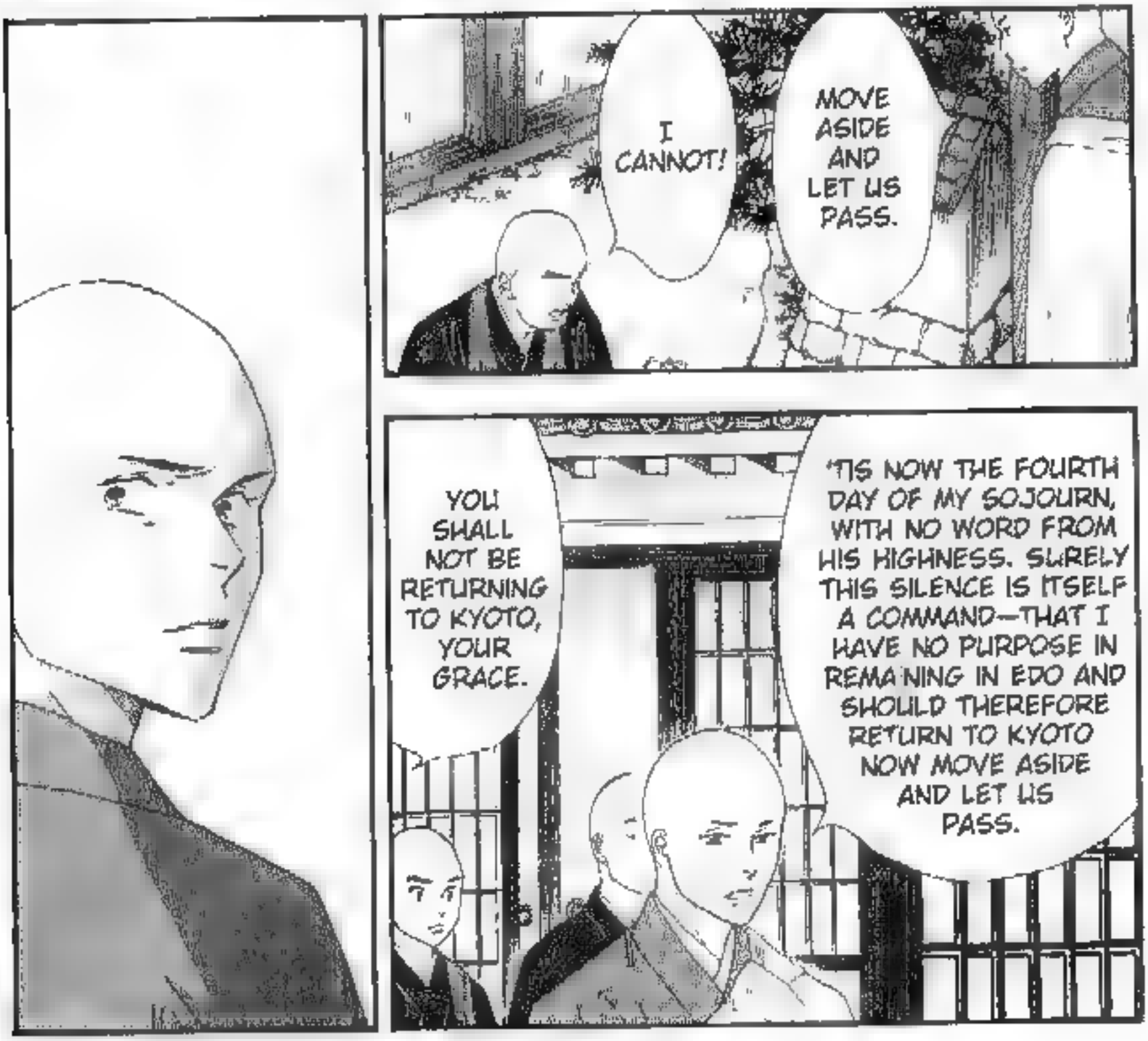
I CANNOT!
MOVE ASIDE AND LET US PASS.
YOU SHALL NOT BE RETURNING TO KYOTO, YOUR GRACE.
'TIS NOW THE FOURTH DAY OF MY SOJOURN, WITH NO WORD FROM HIS HIGHNESS. SURELY THIS SILENCE IS ITSELF A COMMAND—THAT I HAVE NO PURPOSE IN REMAINING IN EDO AND SHOULD THEREFORE RETURN TO KYOTO NOW MOVE ASIDE AND LET US PASS.

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NAY, NOT "YOUR GRACE," FOR YOU ARE NO LONGER THE ABBOT OF KEIKO-IN, BUT SIMPLY SIR ARIKOTO, SON OF DUKE MADENOKOJI ARIZUMI.

INDEED, YOU ARE NO LONGER IN THE SERVICE OF THE BUDDHA, NOR ARE YOU EVER TO RETURN TO YOUR BIRTHPLACE OF KYOTO!

INSTEAD, YOU SHALL BE ENTERING THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE, WHERE HIS HIGHNESS DOTH AWAIT YOU!

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YOU SHALL REMAIN HERE IN EDO, RENOUNCE YOUR PRIESTLY VOWS AND SERVE THE SHOGUN, LORD IEMITSU, AS HIS CATAMITE!

E'EN SO!

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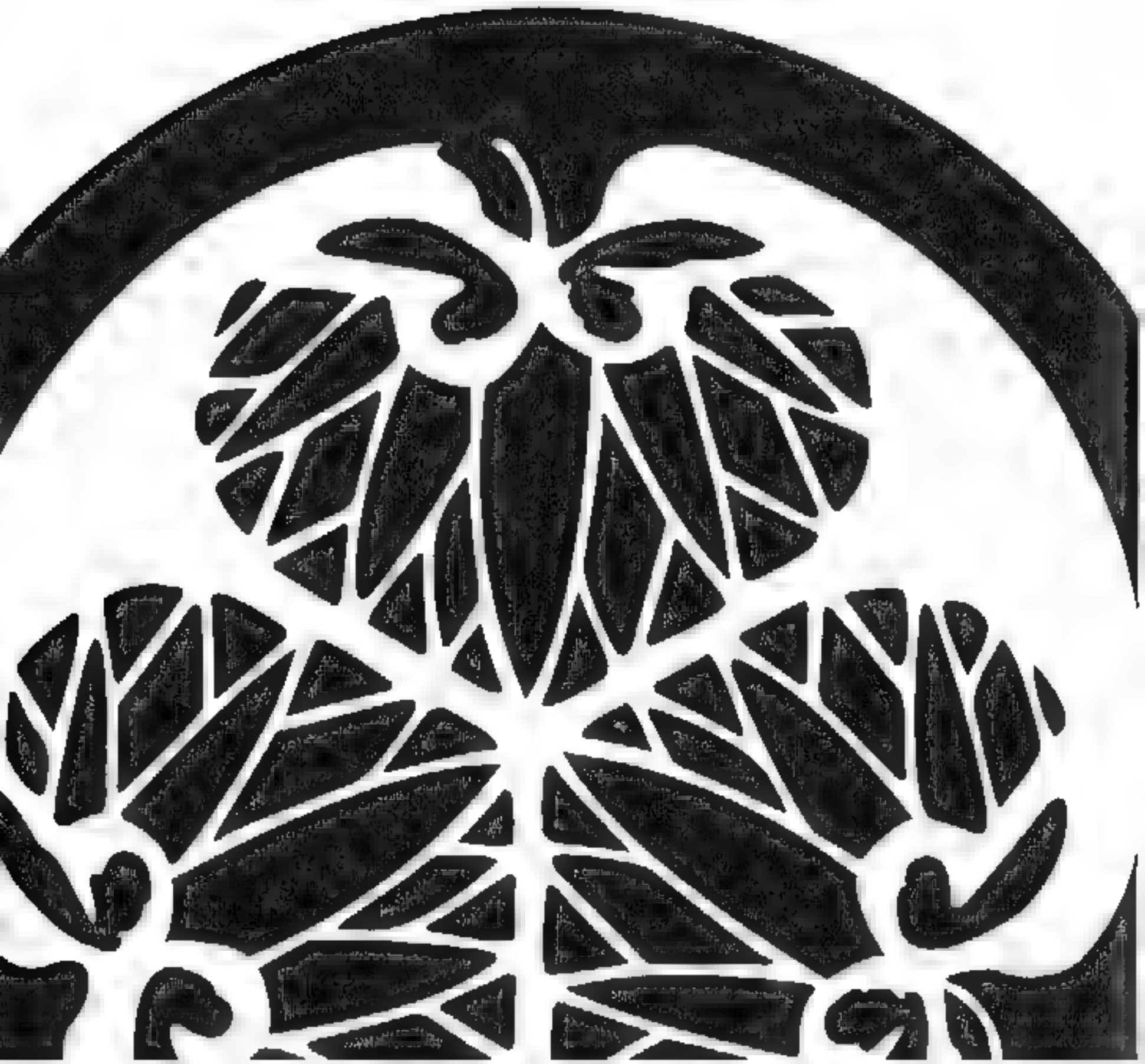
Ōoku: The Inner Chambers

VOLUME 2 · END NOTES

by Akemi Wegmüller



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Page 7, panel 1 - EDO PERIOD

Also known as the Tokugawa period, from 1603 to 1868. It ended when the Meiji Restoration brought an end to the shogunate style of government and reinstated imperial rule.

Page 8, panel 2 - TENGU, USHIWAKA-MARU

Tengu are creatures from Japanese folklore that are sometimes depicted with red faces and long noses. Ushiwaka-maru is the boyhood name of Minamoto-no-Yoshitsune, a legendary warrior who was exiled as a youth to Mt. Kurama, where a tengu taught him martial arts.

Page 17, panel 3 - ARIKOTO

The character Arikoto is based on a real-life concubine of the shogun Ienitsu. She was the adopted daughter of Keiko-in, a Buddhist nunnery in Ise, before she caught the eye of Ienitsu during an audience in Edo and was inducted into the Oku by Lady Kasuga. Prior to her induction, she was housed in a government mansion in Toyasudai until her hair grew out. She was of noble heritage, and her father was the aristocrat Rokuju Ariwara. After Kasuga's death, she took over the governance of the Oku at Ienitsu's behest and is credited with introducing many courtly refinements to the place.

Page 19, panel 3 - KEIKO-IN

A Buddhist nunnery that was once located in Ise city in Mie Prefecture. It closed in 1869 and is now the residence of the head priest of the Ise shrine.

Page 19, panel 3 - MIKADO

Another term for the emperor of Japan, though now obsolete.

Page 19, panel 3 - SUMMONED TO EDO

In the original Japanese, Myoku uses the verb "to descend" when describing travel to Edo because you "ascend" to the imperial capital Kyoto and descend when you leave it in any direction.

Page 29, panel 3 - BARBARIC EASTERN PROVINCES

Kyoto was the imperial capital and home of the aristocracy for centuries. Its culture was a highly refined court culture, and people there often looked down on what they saw as the "barbarians" of eastern Japan.

Page 33, panel 4 - FOUR BOOKS

Also called the Confucian canon, these are classical Chinese texts used as an introduction to Confucianism. They include *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects of Confucius* and *the Mencius*.

Page 35, panel 3 - ZOJO-JI, UENO TOSHO-GU

Zojo-ji is a Buddhist temple that was the Tokugawa family temple and burial ground. In the Japanese, Arikoto says he wants to pay his respects at the mausoleum there. Ueno Tosho-gu is a Shinto shrine that is likewise closely associated with the Tokugawa family. The first shogun, Ieyasu, was deified there.

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Page 40, panel 3 · CATAMITE

The Japanese word is *o-kashō* (お小姓), which is a position as page or attendant that can also include a sexual relationship with their liege.

Page 40, panel 4 · TAYASUDAI

A rural area a short distance from Edo Castle.

Page 49, panel 2 · YOSHIWARA

The pleasure quarters originally located near what is today Nihonbashi in central Tokyo and eventually moved to the outskirts of the city. The area was walled off from the rest of the city and the courtesans were restricted to its confines.

Page 54, panel 3 · THE SQUIRE

This is one variation of the popular *kan-zashi*, or "game of the hands." Another is *jan-ken*, also known as rock-paper-scissors or rochambeau.

Page 98, panel 1 · PHYSICIAN

In the Japanese, the shogun's personal physician is referred to as *o-sai*, or "the spoon."

Page [illegible], panel [illegible] · [illegible]

The kitten is named after one of the characters in *The Tale of Genji*, a young girl with whom Genji is enchanted.

Page 142, panel 2 · MORI RANMARU

One of Oda Nobunaga's trusted attendants (o-koshō).

Page 142, panel 3 · NOBUNAGA

One of the major daimyo or domain lords of the Sengoku era in the 16th century.

Page [illegible], panel [illegible] · [illegible]

A classic poem of the Tang period, *Farewell* by Wang Wei. Chinese poetry is written in rows of characters that reflect Chinese word order, so even though Japanese readers can understand the kanji, there is still a level of translation required. Arikata and Gyokuei are reciting the Japanese translation, with Arikata reading further exposition.

Page 156, panel 3 · SUBURI

Practice swings, an integral part of kendo training.

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Creator Biography

Fumi Yoshinaga

Fumi Yoshinaga is a Tokyo-born manga creator who debuted in 1994 with *Tsuki to Sandaru* (*The Moon and the Sandals*). Yoshinaga has won numerous awards, including the 2000 Osamu Tezuka Cultural Prize for *Ooku*, the 2002 Kodansha Manga Award for her series *Antique Bakery*, and the 2006 Japan Media Arts Festival Excellence Award for *Ooku*. She was also nominated for the 2008 Eisner Award for Best Writer/Artist.

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Ōoku

THE INNER CHAMBERS

by Fumi Yoshinaga

Vol. 2

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YOU CANNOT SERVE HIS HIGHNESS IN THE BEDCHAMBER WITH THAT SHAVEN PATE, OF COURSE. 'TIS NOT SEEMLY.
WELL.
YOU SHALL THEREFORE RESIDE IN A GOVERNMENT MANSION I HAVE SET ASIDE FOR YOU IN TAYASUDAI UNTIL YOUR HAIR IS GROWN LONG ENOUGH TO BE PRESENTABLE.

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HIS GRACE IS THE SCION OF DUKE ARIZUMI, HEAD OF THE NOBLE MADENOKOJI FAMILY! TO SUGGEST THAT THIS HIGH-BORN COURTIER BE MADE THE CATAMITE OF A WARRIOR LORD IS NOTHING SHORT OF INSOLENT!

I-IF THIS BE YOUR IDEA OF A JEST, 'TIS NOT FUNNY!!

Ha ha ha

WHAT A FOOLISH NOTION THIS IS, LADY KASUGA!

I AM ALREADY 18 YEARS OF AGE, FAR TOO ADVANCED IN YEARS TO BE MADE A CATAMITE, MOST SURELY!

COMPARED TO THIS PRIVILEGE YOU HAVE BEEN GRANTED, THE POSITION OF TEMPLE ABBOT IS BUT A NIGGARDLY TRIFLE! RENOUNCE YOUR PRIESTLY VOWS FORTHWITH AND SERVE HENCEFORTH YOUR EARTHLY MASTER!!

HOW DARE YOU CALL THE COMMAND OF HIS HIGHNESS FOOLISH?! 'TIS A GREAT HONOR INDEED THAT YOU ARE CALLED UPON TO SERVE THE SUPREME RULER OF THIS LAND, LORD IEMITSU HIMSELF. REJOICE THAT IT IS YOURS!

I AM INSOLENT?! I?!

!

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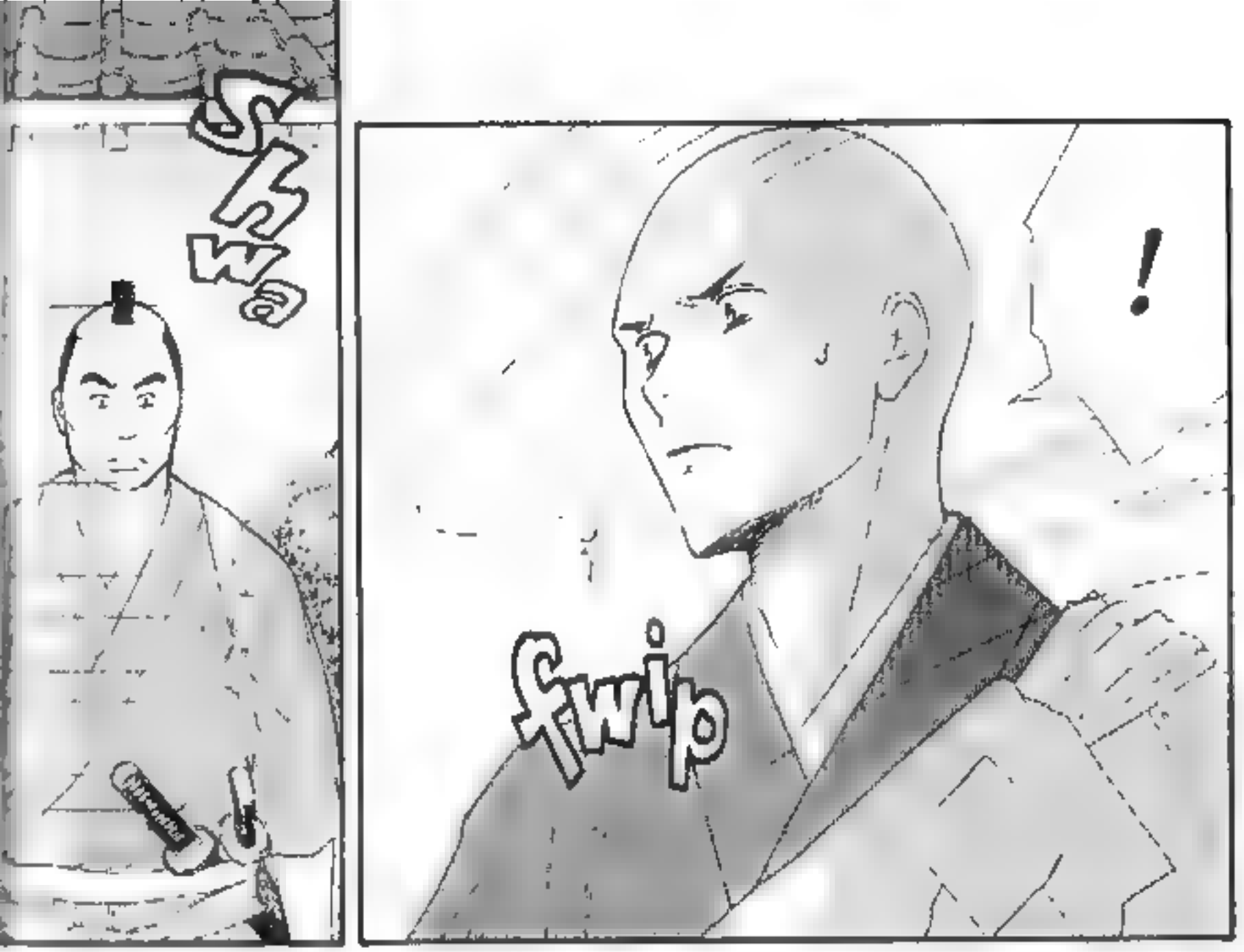

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YOUR GRACE...

MERCY. . UPON US...

UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS NEITHER JEST NOR SHOW.

THINK NOT THAT YOU CAN PUSH YOUR WAY OUT OF HERE AND ESCAPE UNSCATHED, OR INDEED, ALIVE. DO NOT EVEN DREAM OF IT!

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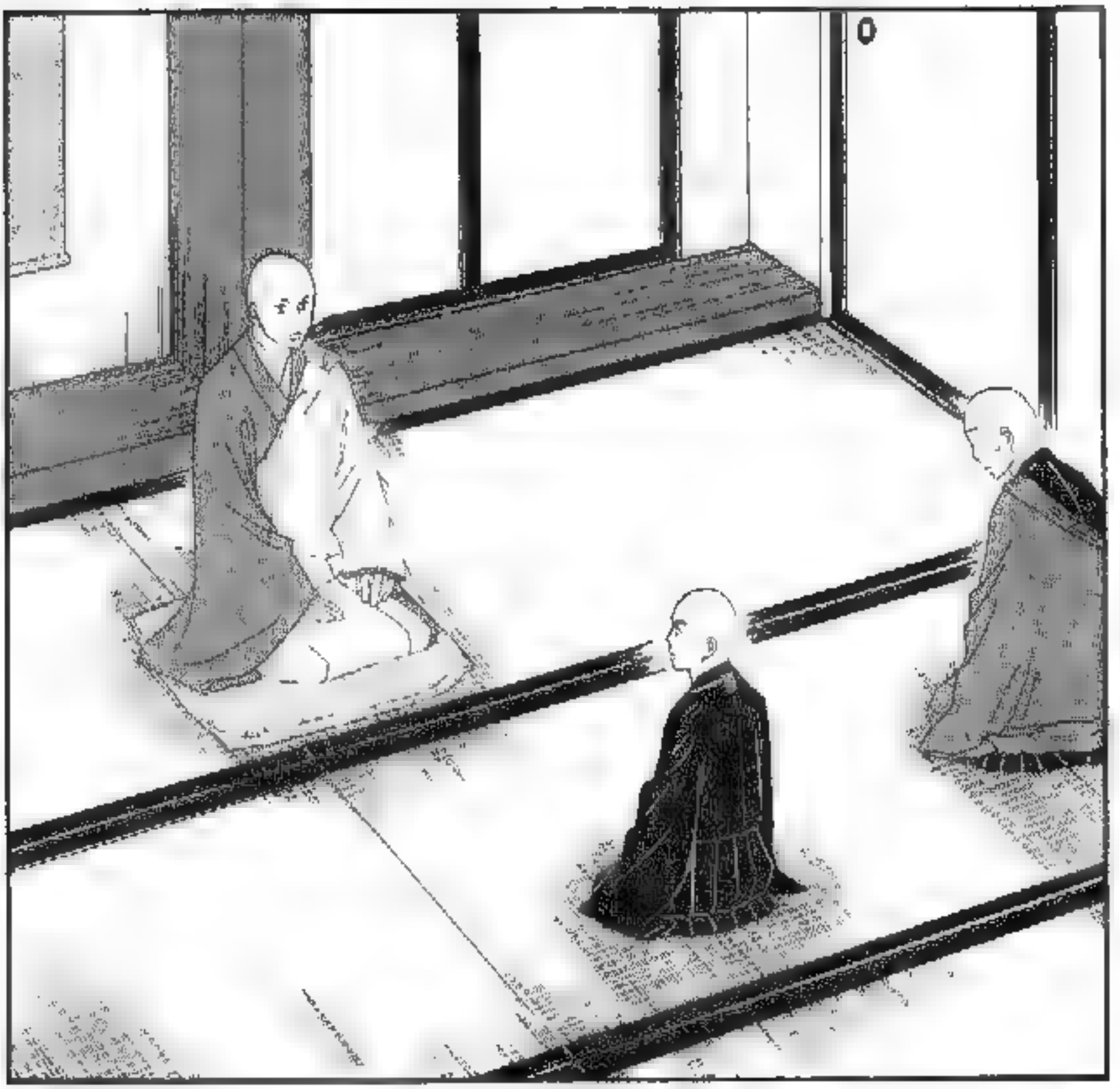

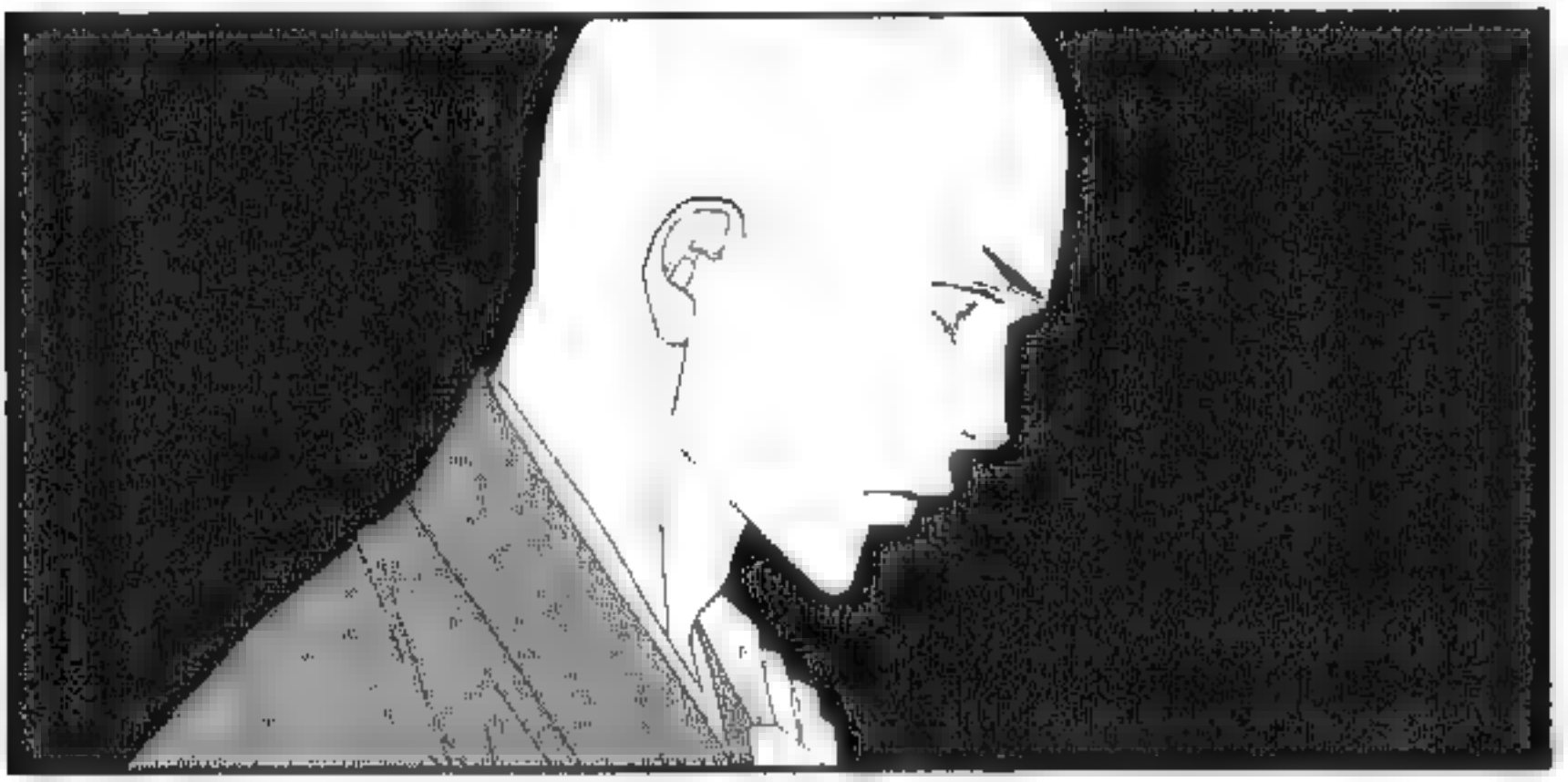

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OUR MASTER SHALL NOT ENTER THE INNER CHAMBERS! 'TWILL NE'ER COME TO PASS!

WATCHED AS WE ARE BY THOSE BURLY SWORD-WIELDING SAMURAI, 'TIS VERILY SO THAT TO ESCAPE IS NOT E'EN TO BE DREAMED OF! IF OUR MASTER TRULY DOTH ENTER THE INNER CHAMBERS, WHAT THEN WILL BECOME OF *US*...?

I WONDER WHAT IS TO BECOME OF THE TWO OF US?

ERM...

HIS GRACE WAS BORN INTO THIS WORLD TO LIFT MANY MORE POOR SOULS LIKE ME OUT OF MISERY! THAT IS HIS DESTINY, AND HE MUST FULFILL IT!!

IF THERE BE ONE THING I KNOW FOR A CERTAINTY, 'TIS THAT OUR MASTER IS THE BUDDHA INCARNATE! I KNEW IT THE MOMENT HE PICKED ME OFF THE STREET, A FILTHY URCHIN NOBODY WOULD TOUCH, AND GENTLY STROKED MY LICE-FILLED HAIR!

I SHALL PEN SOME LINES TO MY FATHER AND HAVE HIM INTERCEDE ON MY BEHALF WITH THE MIKADO.

I THANK THEE FOR THOSE WORDS... I AM BY NO MEANS AS WORTHY AS THAT BUT 'TIS TRUE I CAN IMAGINE NO OTHER LIFE FOR MYSELF THAN THAT OF A BUDDHIST MONK.

GYOKUEI...

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FEAR NOT. OUR BRETHREN AT KEIKO-IN WILL ALSO BE ALERTED THAT SOMETHING IS AMISS WHEN I FAIL TO RETURN, AND MOVE TO SECURE MY FREEDOM.

WE MUST SIMPLY WAIT UNTIL IT COMES TO PASS. LET THEM THREATEN US, LET THEM WHEEDLE US. SO LONG AS I REFUSE TO ACCEDE, WE ARE SAFE.

'TIS A SPLENDID PLAN! WHEN THE MIKADO LEARNS OF YOUR PLIGHT, MY GRACE, HE SHALL MOST CERTAINLY SEND AN EMISSARY TO EDO TO INSIST UPON YOUR RELEASE!

AAH! YOUR FATHER, DUKE MADENOKOJI ARIZUMI!

AYE.

I AM YOTSUBA.

And was it not possible that Lady Kasuga had already forestalled alarm at Keiko-in by sending the temple some kind of missive?

Even if his master penned a letter to his father the duke, would it in sooth reach him?

A thought flashed across Gyokuei's mind

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I AM KIKYO.

AND I AM KOGIKU.

WE ARE COME HERE TODAY WITH SPECIAL PERMISSION TO LEAVE THE DISTRICT OF YOSHIWARA UNTIL THE MORROW, AND DO HOPE YOUR HONOR AND KIND SIRS WILL TAKE PLEASURE IN OUR COMPANY.

IT SEEMS LADY KASUGA BELIEVES THAT BY ENTICING ME WITH THE COMPANY OF THESE WOMEN, SHE CAN GET ME TO CHANGE MY MIND.

DEAR ME...! 'TIS THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE THAT I'VE SEE COURTESANS UP SO CLOSE.

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WITH RESPECT, MY LORD...WE MAY NOT. WE HAVE BEEN COMMANDED TO REMAIN HERE UNTIL YOUR WORSHIP HAS FULLY ENJOYED OUR COMPANY.

...AND CONSENT TO QUITTING THIS PLACE WITHOUT FURTHER ADO.

I THANK YOU FOR COMING ALL THIS WAY, BUT PRAY ACCEPT A GRATUITY...

WHAT SHALL WE DO, YOUR GRACE?

...I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN.

WHAAT?!

ALL RIGHT THEN, LET US ENJOY THEIR COMPANY.

Ha ha ha ha ha

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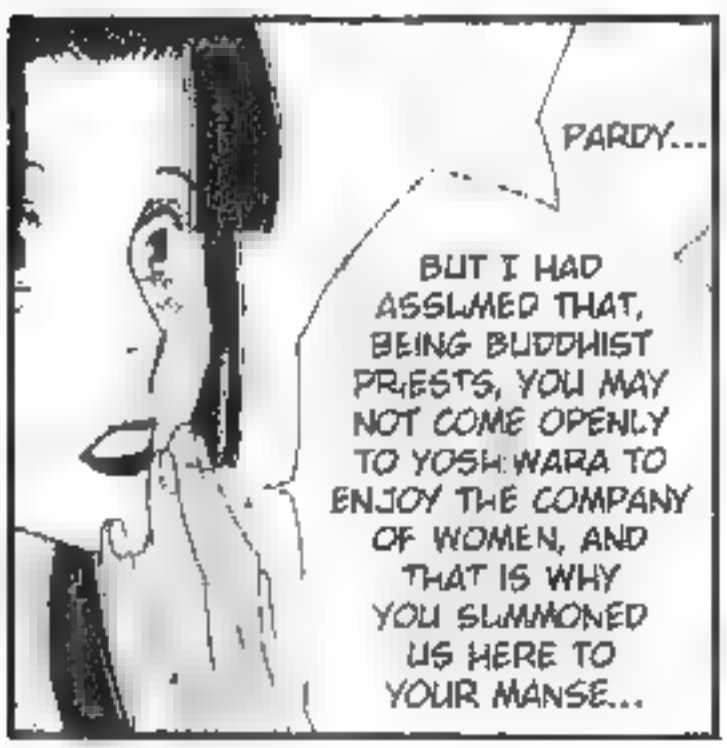
PARDY...
BUT I HAD ASSUMED THAT, BEING BUDDHIST PRIESTS, YOU MAY NOT COME OPENLY TO YOSHIWARA TO ENJOY THE COMPANY OF WOMEN, AND THAT IS WHY YOU SUMMONED US HERE TO YOUR MANSE...

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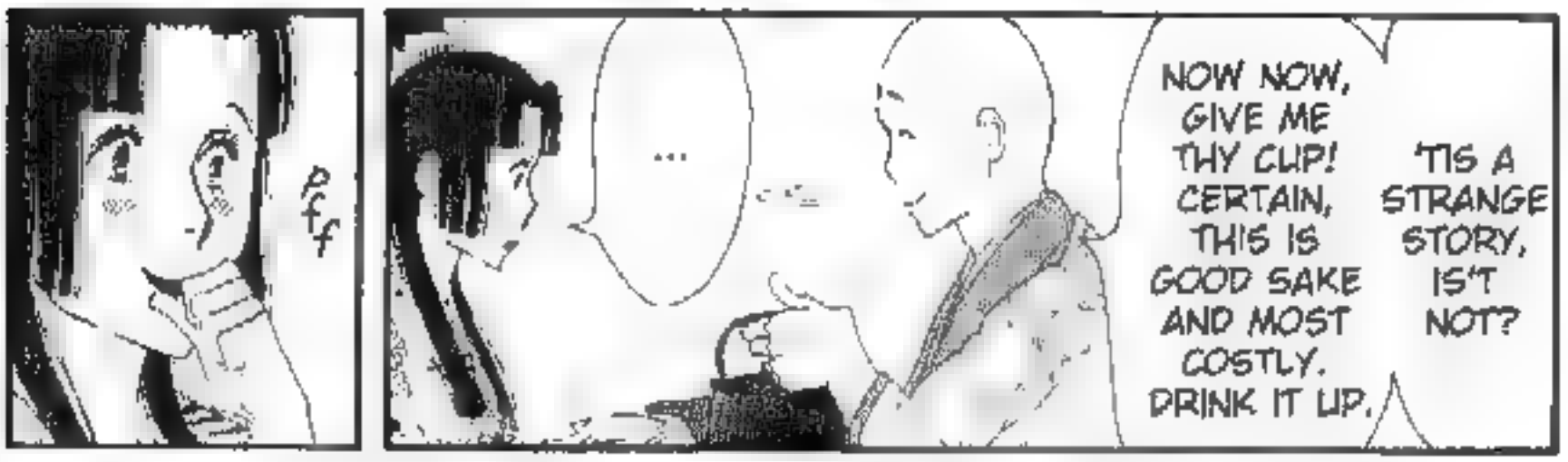
Dead serious.
INDEED, TO BE PERFECTLY FRANK, I AM LIKE THEE IN THAT I KNOW NOT WHY I AM BROUGHT HERE TO THIS MANSE OR WHAT IT IS I SHOULD DO HERE...!
THOU WAST MOST MISTAKEN.



THY NAME WAS KOGIKU, WAS IT NOT? HAST THOU JUST ENTERED THE LICENSED QUARTERS RECENTLY?
AH, FINALLY, I HAVE GOT THEE TO LAUGH!
YOU ARE A RIGHT FUNNY PRIEST, SIR.
YOU HAVE A FACE LIKE A GOD, AND YOU SAY SUCH DROLL THINGS!

I WAS A MARRIED WOMAN UNTIL A SHORT WHILE AGO, YOU SEE. BUT MY HUSBAND SOLD ME TO THE BROTHEL...
YOU MUST THINK IT ODD INDEED THAT A WOMAN ALREADY THREE AND TWENTY YEARS OF AGE STILL BE SO AWKWARD AS A MAID. IN SOOTH, I AM ONLY COME TODAY IN PLACE OF A YOUNGER LASS, WHO CAUGHT A CHILL.
...YES, SIR. I'VE ONLY JUST LATELY GAINED A COUPLE OR SO REGULAR CUSTOMERS...

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INDEED, THOU HAST THE BEAUTY OF A SAINT...

Hee!

BUT THAT IS BECAUSE THOU ART SO LOVELY!

I WAS PLEDGED AS THE SECURITY FOR HIS GAMBLING DEBTS.

BUT I AM THANKFUL ALL THE SAME, THAT E'EN A WOMAN LIKE MYSELF HAD A TASTE OF MARRIED LIFE, FOR IN THIS TIME OF PLAGUE AND SICKNESS, NOT ALL MAIDENS ARE SO FORTUNATE.

THY HUSBAND!

THE LADYKILLER STRIKES AGAIN!

TRULY, MY LORD, YOU FLATTER ME TOO MUCH!

I...I KNOW NOT WHAT TO SAY!

A...A SAINT?!

ONE... TWO, AND...

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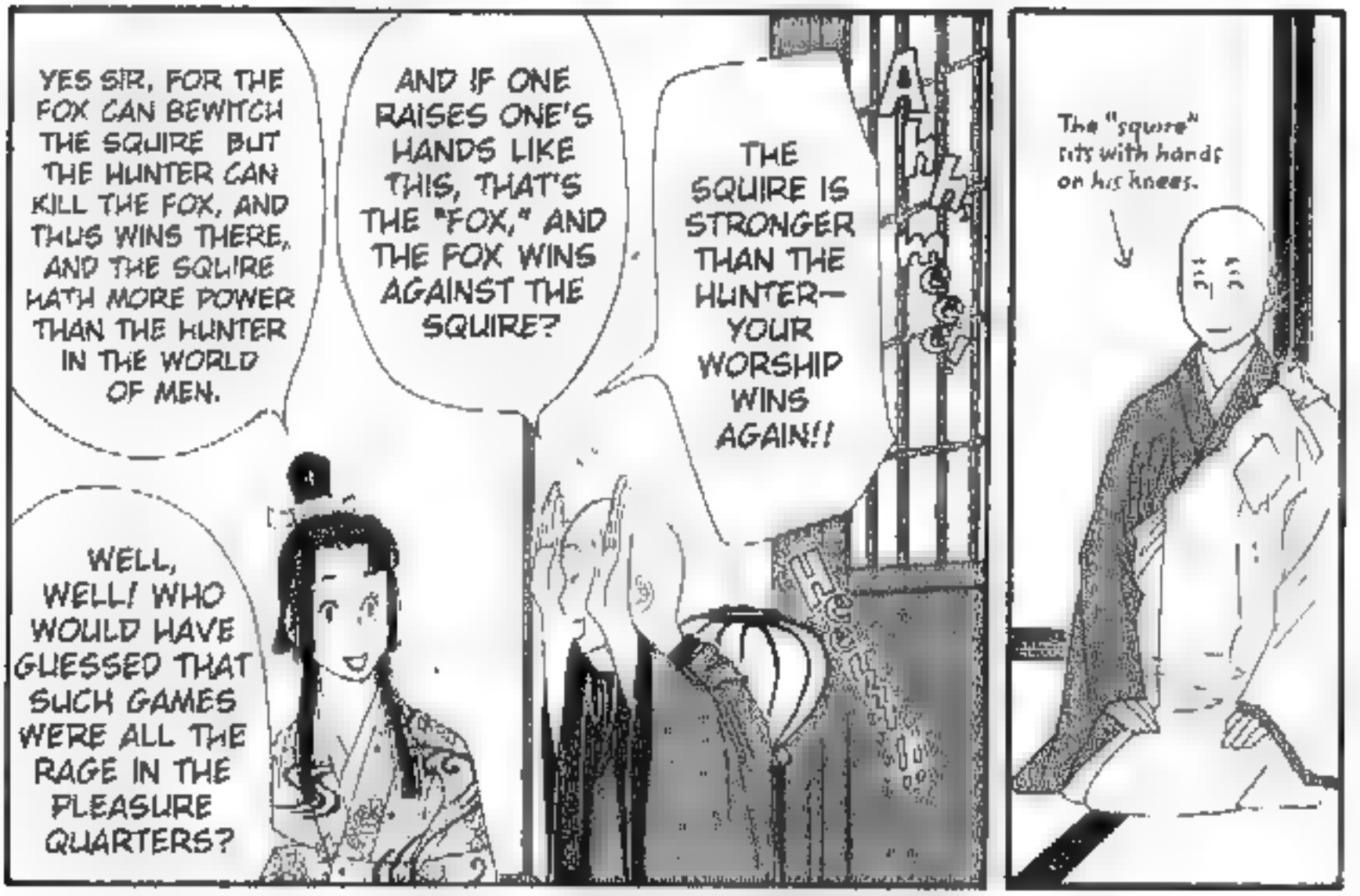
YES SIR, FOR THE FOX CAN BEWITCH THE SQUIRE BUT THE HUNTER CAN KILL THE FOX, AND THUS WINS THERE, AND THE SQUIRE HATH MORE POWER THAN THE HUNTER IN THE WORLD OF MEN.
AND IF ONE RAISES ONE'S HANDS LIKE THIS, THAT'S THE "FOX," AND THE FOX WINS AGAINST THE SQUIRE?
THE SQUIRE IS STRONGER THAN THE HUNTER— YOUR WORSHIP WINS AGAIN!!
The "squire" sits with hands on his knees.
WELL, WELL! WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED THAT SUCH GAMES WERE ALL THE RAGE IN THE PLEASURE QUARTERS?

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VERILY SO?
THEN I SAY, 'TIS TIME WE SAY THIS EVENING IS O'ER.
THAT MAKETH YOU THE FIRST OF US TO WIN THREE TIMES, YOUR WORSHIP, SO YOU ARE THE WINNER OF THE GAME!
NOW YOU MAY COMMAND US TO DO AS YOU FANCY, SIR. ANYTHING YOU FANCY!

I CANNOT AND SHALL NOT LIE WITH YOU.
YOU MAY NOT GO UNTIL DAWN, I DARESAY. BUT I CANNOT YIELD ON THIS COUNT, EITHER.
NAY, YOUR WORSHIP, WE...

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SLIDE

HA HA! I WONDER IF IT TRULY BE SO?

IF 'TIS YOUR INTENTION TO MAKE ME BREACH MY CHASTITY AND THUS FORFEIT MY PRIESTLY STANDING, LADY KASUGA, 'TIS BUT A WASTE OF TIME.

NOW BED ONE OF THESE WENCHES.

I DARESAY THIS WORLD BE FULL OF MONKS WHO FURTIVELY LIE WITH WENCHES, AND YET HERE IS ONE WHO, GIVEN THREE WENCHES FOR THE NIGHT, SPEAKETH LOFTILY OF CHASTITY AND BIDDETH THE WENCHES GO HOME! I MUST SAY, YOUR PURITY OF HEART IS QUITE IRKSOME, SIR.

NAY, WHY ARE *YOU* SO OBSTINATE? INDEED, I WISH TO KNOW WHEREFORE YOU GO TO SUCH LENGTHS TO FORCE ONE WHO HATH MOST WILLINGLY TAKEN PRIESTLY VOWS TO RENOUNCE THOSE VOWS?!

WHY ARE YOU SO OBSTINATE? A WOMAN'S BODY IS A THING OF PLEASURE. TAKE ONE TO ENJOY.

I REFUSE!

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AND I KNOW... THAT 'NEATH THOSE PRIESTLY ROBES LIES THE ROBUST FLESH OF A YOUNG MAN, BURSTING WITH VIRILITY AND FILLED WITH HOT RED BLOOD...

LADY KASUGA!

TO RENOUNCE EARTHLY PLEASURES AND RETREAT TO THE AUSTERITIES OF A MONASTERY IS A THING ONE SHOULD DO AFTER TIRING OF SECULAR LIFE. IT PAINS ME TO SEE ONE SO YOUNG AS YOU, STILL IGNORANT OF THE MANY PLEASURES OF THE WORLD, WITHDRAW INTO A LIFE OF ABSTINENT CONTEMPLATION. INDEED, I PITY YOU, SIR.

SPEAK NOT SO SHAMELESSLY, 'TIS ODIOUS!!

AH, I SEE I HAVE HIT UPON'T. EVEN YOU, MOST NOBLE SIR ARIKOTO, ARE NOT IMMUNE TO THE SCENT OF THESE WOMEN'S PERFUME, TO THE MANY CHARMS OF THEIR APPEARANCE, VOICES AND TOUCH. THIS EVENING YOU HAVE FELT A MANLY DESIRE AROUSED AND COURSING THROUGH—

'TIS THE FIRST TIME THAT I SEE YOU VERILY ANGERED, SIR. AND A GOOD THING IT IS! 'TIS THE PROOF THAT YOU ARE, INDEED, A RED-BLOODED MAN.

HA HA!

..!!

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NOW...

LET ME SAY IT AGAIN. BED ONE OF THESE WENCHES, SIR ARIKOTO.

I REFUSE!

YOU WILL NOT CONSENT FOR ANY REASON?

IS THAT SO.

I BELIEVE I HAVE MADE THAT CLEAR!!

THEN SLAY THE MONK ON THE LEFT.

M'LADY!

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MYOKEL..

Hyaaaaaaaagh!!

Hyaaaaaaaagh!

FRIAR MYOKEI!!

WILL THAT WENCH NOT STOP SHRIEKING?! SLAY HER TOO!!

Hyaaaaaaaagh!

Hyaaaaaaaagh!

YOUR WORSHIP ...!!

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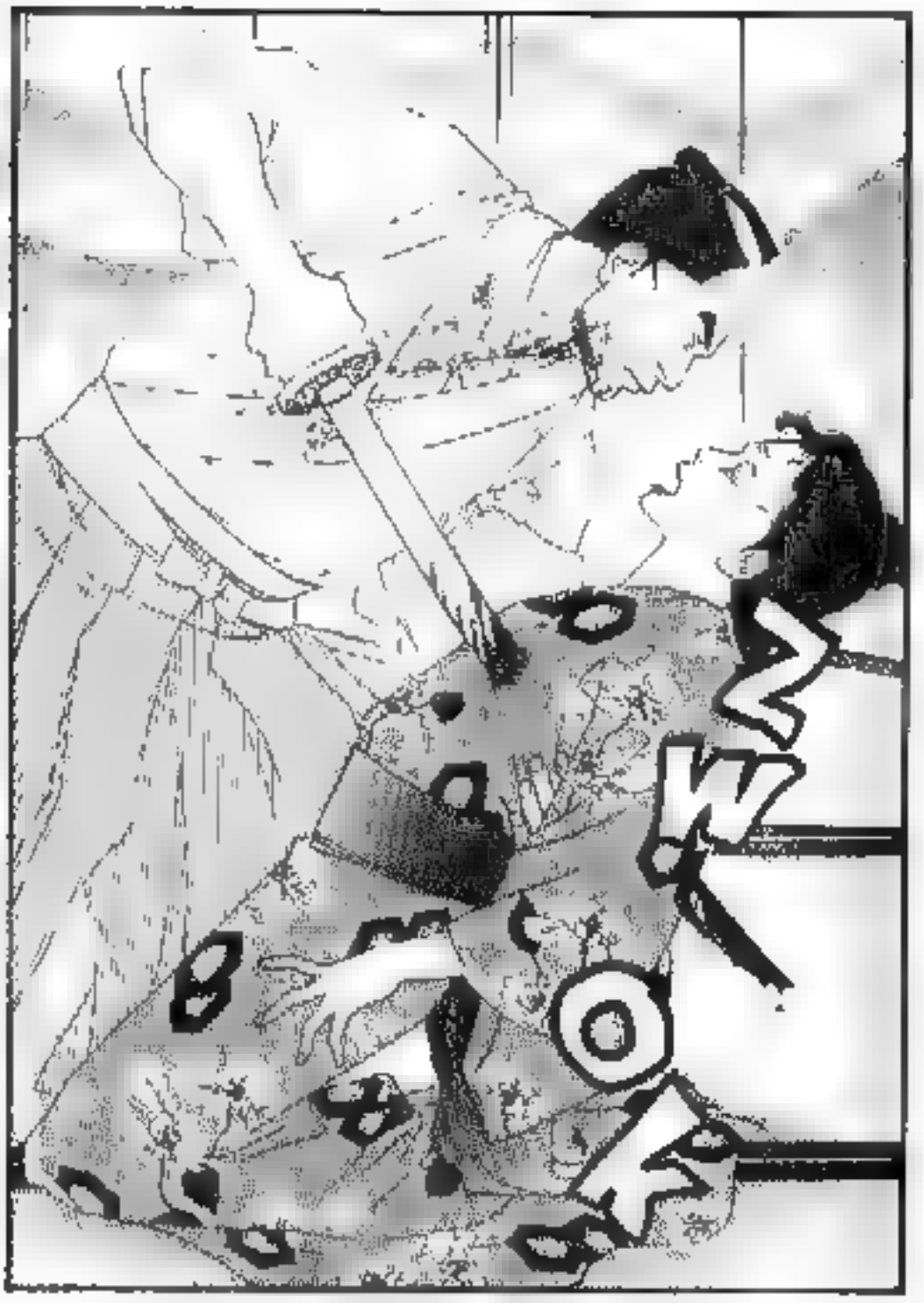

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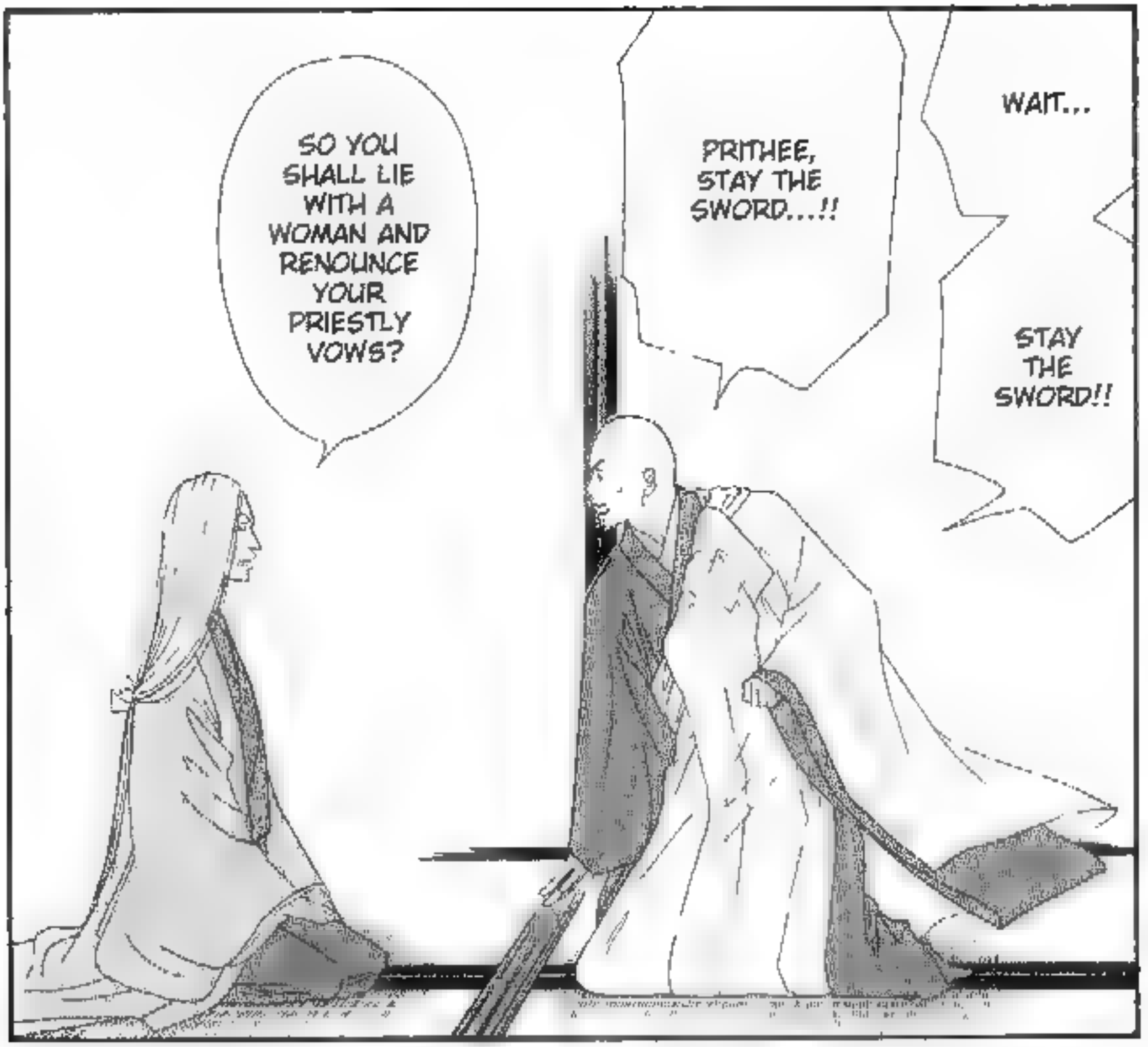

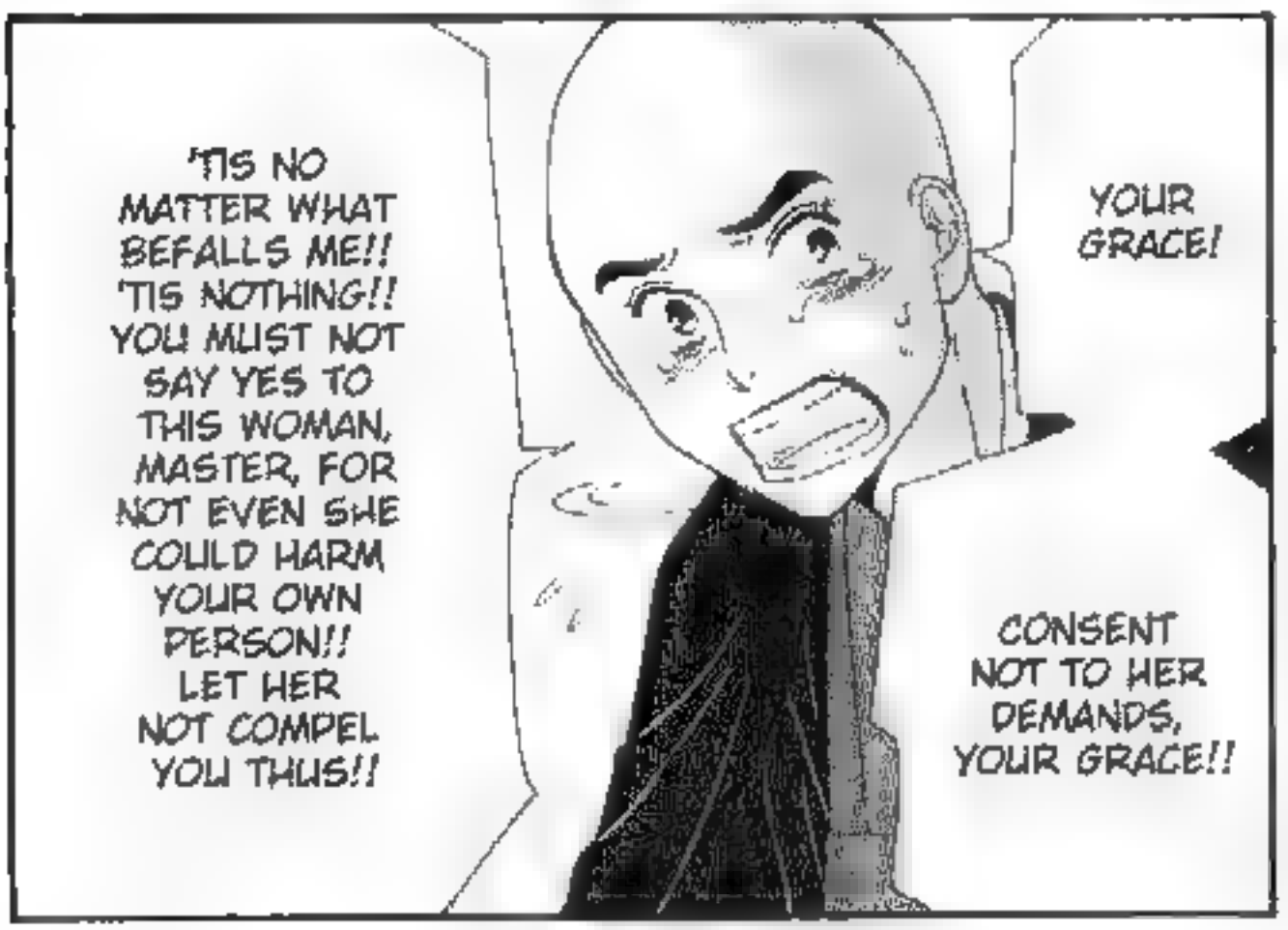
'TIS NO MATTER WHAT BEFALLS ME!! 'TIS NOTHING!! YOU MUST NOT SAY YES TO THIS WOMAN, MASTER, FOR NOT EVEN SHE COULD HARM YOUR OWN PERSON!! LET HER NOT COMPEL YOU THUS!!
YOUR GRACE!
CONSENT NOT TO HER DEMANDS, YOUR GRACE!!

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I THINK YOU NOW WELL UNDERSTAND THAT WE HERE IN KANTO ARE SHORT OF TEMPER. COME, COME!

IF YOU ACCEDE NOT, YET ANOTHER WILL BE DEAD BY YOUR FAULT!!

COME, MY PATIENCE IS WEARING THIN!!

ACCEDE NOT, YOUR GRACE!! LET HER NOT INTIMIDATE YOU IN THIS MANNER!!

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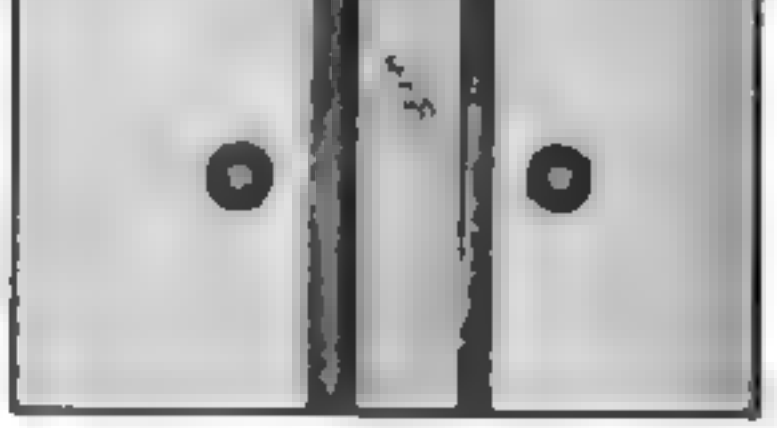

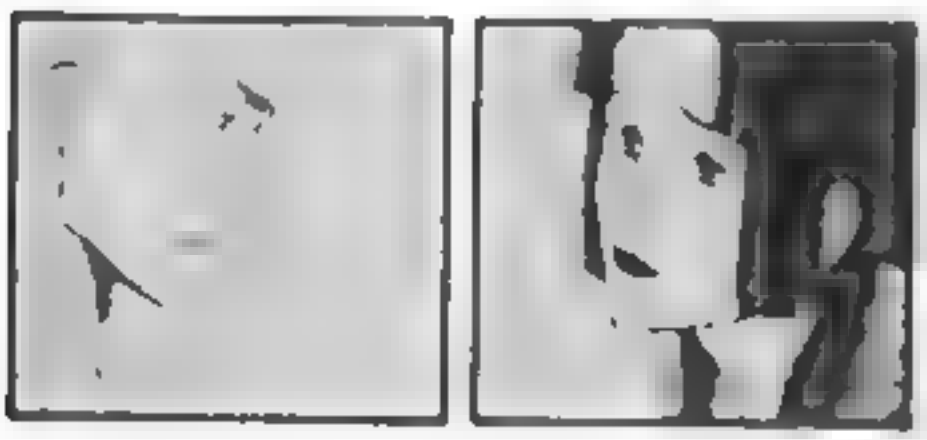

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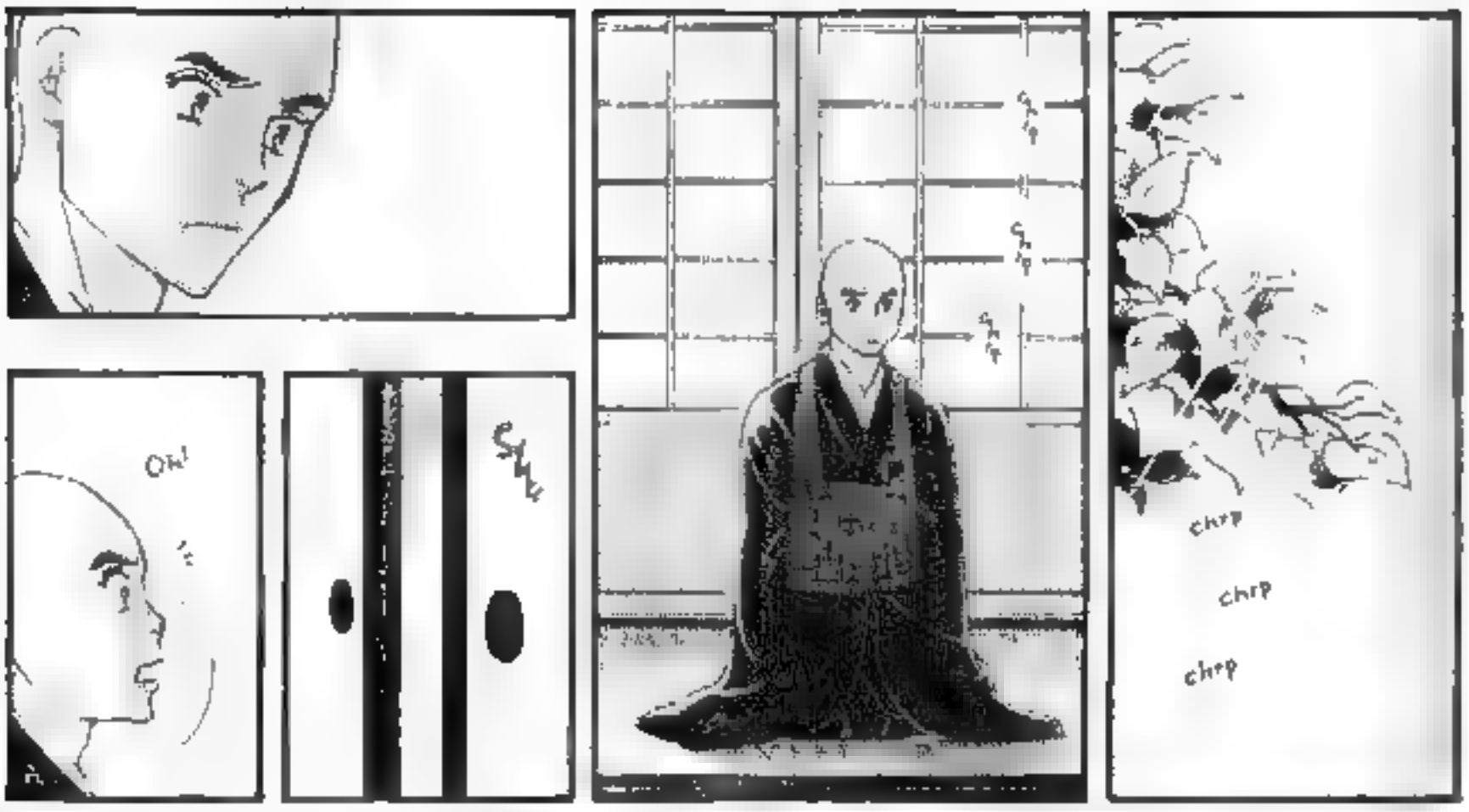

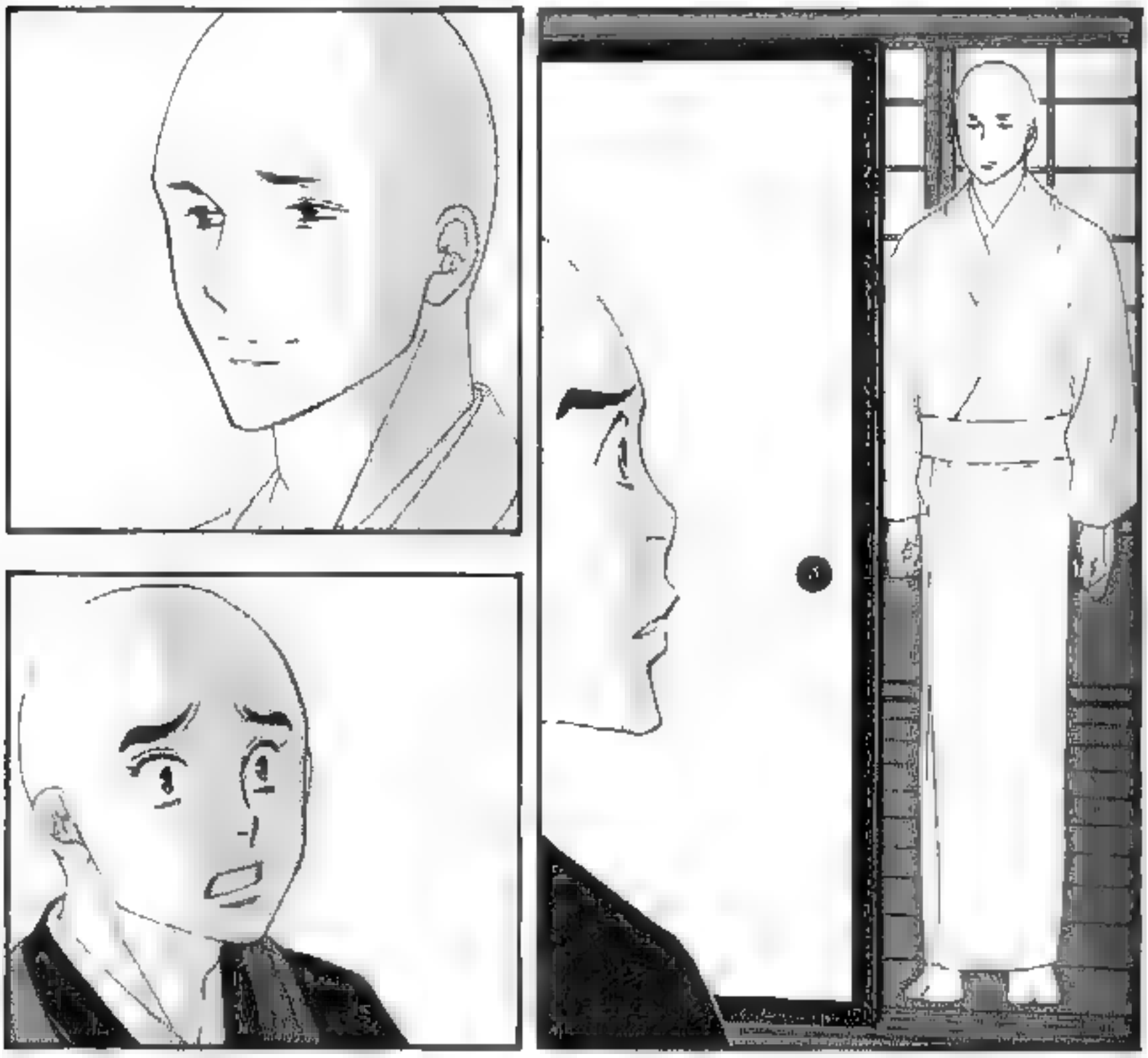

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GYOKUEI.

I SHALL LET MY HAIR GROW LONG.

WAAH

MASTER, NOOOO!!

SO I CANNOT CHANGE THY RESOLVE, ARIKOTO.

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'TIS PITIFUL INDEED, THAT WE HAVE NOT THE MEANS TO KEEP THEE .. A NOBLE FAMILY WE MAY BE, BUT IN SOOTH WE ARE QUITE WOEFULLY IMPECUNIOUS.

AS THY FATHER, IT IS A GREAT REGRET TO ME TO LET A SON SO EXCELLENT IN BOTH TASTE AND LEARNING WITHDRAW FROM THE WORLD TO PURSUE THE LIFE OF A FRIAR.

YOUR HONOR.

'TIS BEYOND MERE RESOLVE NOW, HONORED SIRE, AS YOU CAN SEE, FOR I HAVE TAKEN MY VOWS AND SHAVED MY PATE.

AS THE FIRSTBORN I SHOULD HAVE BECOME A COURTIER. BUT INSTEAD, AS AN ACOLYTE, I COULD STUDY TO MY HEART'S CONTENT NOT ONLY THE BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES AND ZEN TEACHINGS, BUT ALSO POETRY AND THE CHINESE CLASSICS.

IT WAS MY OWN WISH TO TAKE THESE VOWS. INDEED, I AM GRATEFUL FOR MY GOOD FORTUNE, THAT I WAS THE THIRD SON BORN TO THE MADENOKOJI FAMILY.

RATHER THAN SPEND MY DAYS DALLYING WITH LADIES-IN-WAITING, I WISH TO DEVOTE MYSELF TO THINKING ABOUT HOW I MIGHT HELP RELIEVE THE SUFFERINGS OF THIS WORLD.

I HAVE SEEN, IN A BACK ALLEY OF THIS CAPITAL, A LITTLE GIRL CLAD ONLY IN RAGS AND COVERED WITH SCABS, SUCK THE SNOT FROM HER INFANT BROTHER'S NOSE SO THAT HE MIGHT BREATHE BETTER. AND WHEN I SAW THAT, I THOUGHT TO MYSELF THAT I COULD NEVER RETURN TO THE LIFE OF A COURT NOBLE.

AND ABOVE ALL, MY LIFE AS A TEMPLE NOVICE LET ME GLIMPSE THE SUFFERINGS OF ORDINARY FOLK.

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ALL OF IT...

...WAS BUT AN EMPTY DREAM.

ARI-KOTO...

I AM NOT WITHOUT AMBITION, YOUR HONOR.

I HOPE ONE DAY TO BECOME THE ABBOT OF KEIKO-IN, AND THEN TO GIVE SUCCOR TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS I POSSIBLY CAN!

HOW WEAK I FIND I AM. HOW UTTERLY POWERLESS.

IN SOOTH, I WAS ONLY MADE ABBOT OF KEIKO-IN BECAUSE I WAS A SON OF THE EXALTED MADENOKOJI FAMILY, NOT FOR ANY STRENGTHS OF MINE OWN.

I COULD NOT EVEN SAVE MYOKEI, OR THAT COURTESAN AS THEY WERE CUT DOWN IN FRONT OF MY VERY EYES. AFTER WHICH, I WAS COERCED INTO LYING WITH A WOMAN.

HOW WEAK I AM!

I TOO SHALL RENOUNCE MY VOWS AND ENTER THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE WITH YOUR GRACE!!

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I NE'ER TOOK THESE VOWS TO SERVE THE LORD BUDDHA, YOUR GRACE! I SERVE YOU, MASTER, AND NO OTHER!

IF THOU DOST THAT, THOU SHALT NEVERMORE BE ABLE TO RETURN TO KYOTO. GO THOU BACK TO KEIKO-IN AND–

W-WHAT ART THOU SAYING, GYOKUEI?

NAY!

LORD ARIKOTO SAYETH HE SHALL TAKE THE LITTLE DISCIPLE WITH HIM INTO THE INNER CHAMBERS?

AND HE SHALL ANYWAY HAVE NEED OF A PERSONAL ATTENDANT IN HIS CHAMBERS. LET HIM TAKE THE BOY WITH HIM— WE CAN DEAL WITH THE CHILD LATER IF HE PROVES TROUBLESOME.

WELL, ALL RIGHT. 'TWOULD BE A BOTHER TO PREVAIL UPON HIM AGAIN...

WHAT SHALL I TELL HIM, REVEREND KASUGA?

...

YES, M'LADY. AND IF YOU AGREE NOT TO THIS PROPOSAL, THAT CERTAINLY THIS TIME HE SHALL REFUSE TO BUDGE FURTHER...

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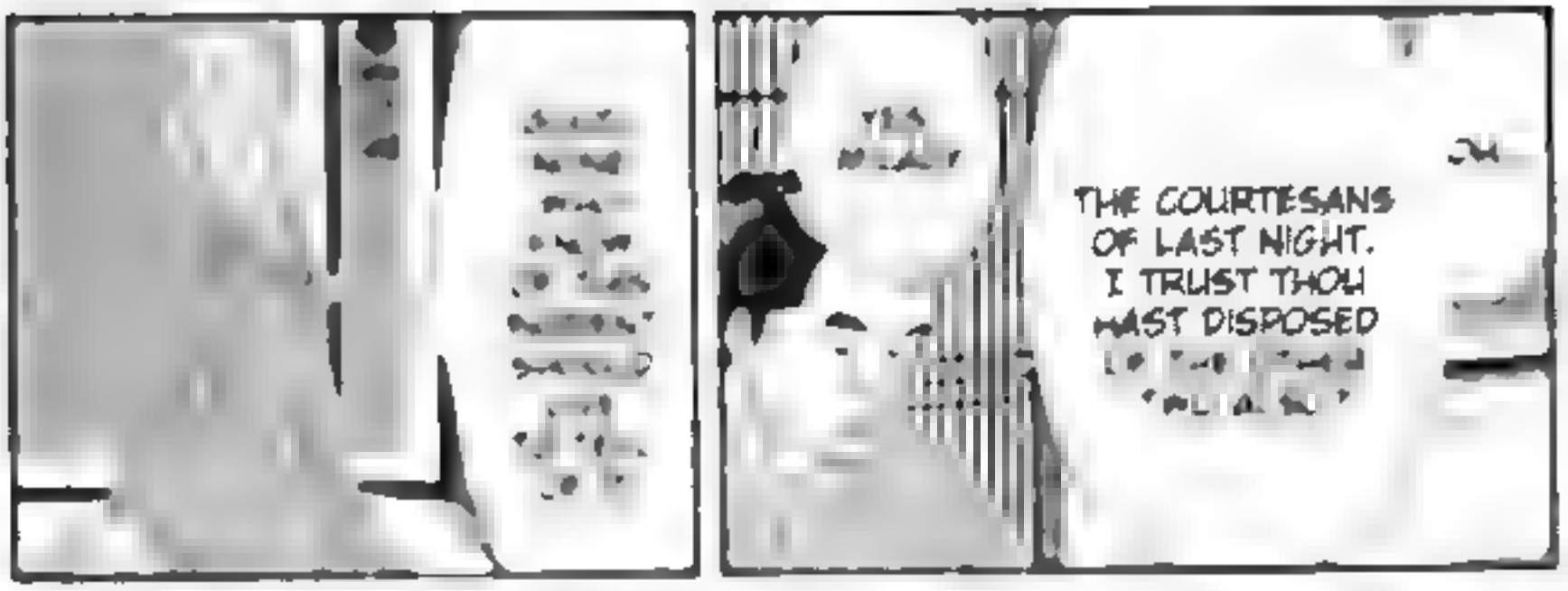

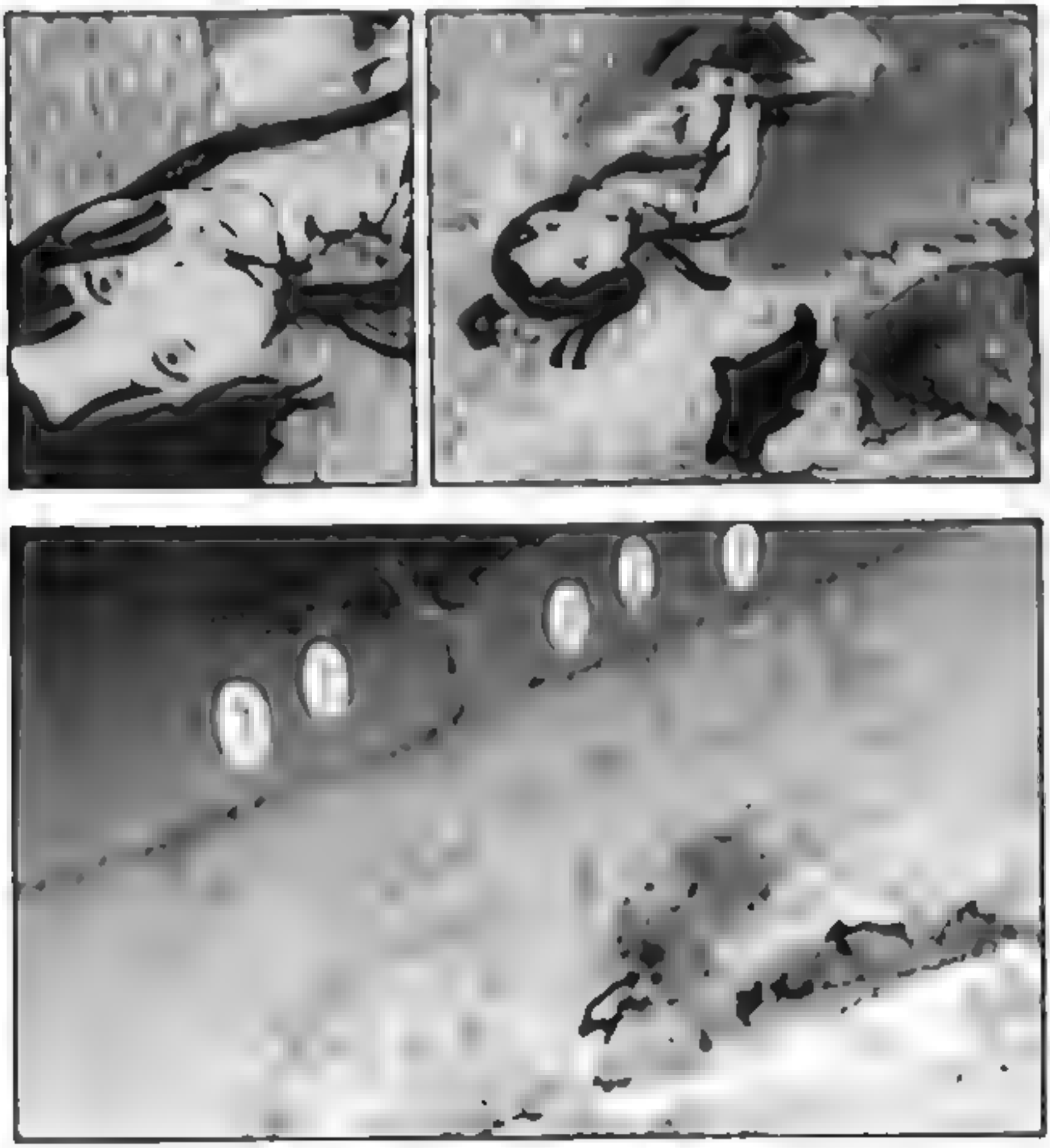

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In the meantime, the Redface Pox wrought havoc across western Japan. The male population of the country decreased to just half of the female.

Arikoto and Gyokuei remained in the government mansion provided by Lady Kasuga in Tayasudai, waiting for their hair to grow long enough to be presentable

Six months later.

MASTER ARIKOTO.

WE HAVE ARRIVED IN THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE.

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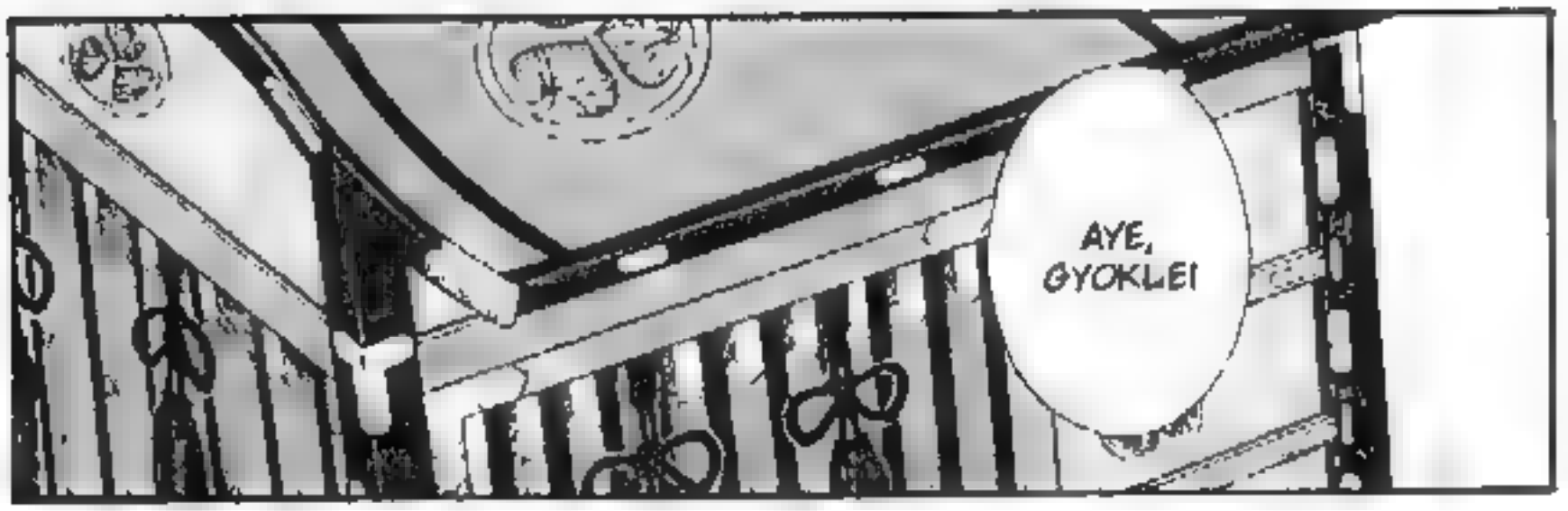

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Ōoku

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NNGH...!

chrp

chrp

chrp

YASUKE! YASUKE...!

HOW CANST THOU LEAVE THY AGED MOTHER BEHIND LIKE THIS, THOU WRETCHED SON?!

FAAATHERR!!

Waaah!!

WAAAAGH!! PAPPYYYYY!!

Gyaaagh!

Gyaaagh!

...

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MOTHER..
AND WHAT KIND OF WIFE ART THOU...?! LOVEST THY HUSBAND NOT?! HERE IS YASUKE DEAD MOST SUDDENLY FROM TH.S HORRIBLE CONTAGION, YET I HAVE NOT SEEN THEE SHED A SINGLE TEAR!!
TADZU!

WHO THEN SHALL LOOK AFTER THE FAMILY'S LANDS...?
MY MIND IS TOO FULL OF OTHER WORRIES. CHIEFLY, HOW WE SHALL GET BY FROM THE MORROW...
NOW THAT YASUKE-DON IS NO MORE, WE HAVE NOT E'EN ONE MAN LEFT HERE IN THE KANBARA HOLSEHOLD.

E'EN AMONG THE SHARECROPPERS WHO ACTUALLY TILL THE LAND, THERE ARE SCARCELY ANY MEN LEFT! 'TIS THE REASON THAT YASUKE-DON WENT INTO THE FIELDS HIMSELF AND BECAME SO WEARIED DOING WORK THAT WAS NOT HIS WONT. THAT IS WHY HE FELL ILL, I'M SURE OF'T...'!
SHALL WHAT?!
'TIS CLEAR WHO...AND THAT IS YOUR SON, SOTARO, THERE' UNTIL HE COMES OF AGE, YOU AND I SHALL—

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WHAT FOOLISHNESS IS THIS, TADZU?! THOU ART THE WIFE OF A LANDED FARMING FAMILY. THY WORK IS TO LOOK AFTER THIS HOUSE AND RAISE THY CHILDREN. THESE ARE IMPORTANT TASKS!

INDEED, I AGREE!

BUT MY REQUEST WAS MADE WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT CERTAINLY I SHALL CARRY OUT MY WIFELY DUTIES FIRST!

...NGH!

...I WISH TO MAKE OF YOU A REQUEST, DEAR MOTHER!

I BEG YOUR LEAVE TO TAKE YASUKE-DON'S PLACE TILLING THE FIELDS THAT BELONG TO THE KANBARA FAMILY!

BEFORE BEING WED TO YASUKE-DON, I WORKED ALONGSIDE MY PARENTS IN THEIR FIELDS EVERY DAY. E'EN AN HOUR OR TWO OF LABOR A DAY CAN SURELY BE OF SOME HELP!

DEAR MOTHER

IN THE FAMILY OF MY BIRTH, BOTH OF MY YOUNGER BROTHERS ARE DEAD FROM THE REDFACE POX. MY ELDER BROTHER, THE ONLY MAN REMAINING IN THE FAMILY, HATH LOST HIS FIRSTBORN SON TO THE SAME DISEASE.

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I TOO!

SATO! SOTARO IS A LAD, AND I CAN SEE THE SENSE OF HIM GOING INTO THE FIELDS. BUT THOU AND KAE? LET THE WOMEN OF OUR SHARECROPPERS WIELD A HOE FIRST. ERE LASSES OF THE FARMER'S FAMILY DO IT!

NAY, KAE, THOU ART STILL TOO SMALL. BUT SOON, WHEN THOU ART GROWN A BIT, THEN CANST THOU TOO HELP OUR MOTHER.

I TOO, MOTHER!

I CAN HELP IN THE FIELDS TOO! I AM STRONG AND STURDY, AND SURE TO BE OF SOME USE!

MOTHER!

SATO... SOTARO...

SATO...

WE MAY CRY, AND WE MAY WAIL, BUT THAT CHANGETH NOT THE FACT THAT THERE ARE NO MEN LEFT TO WORK! IF THAT BE SO, THEN THERE IS NOTHING FOR'T BUT FOR THE WOMEN TO GO INTO THE FIELDS AND TILL THEM, OR THE LAND BEQUEATHED TO US BY OUR ANCESTORS SHALL GO TO WASTE!

HAVE YOU NOT LOOKED OUT ACROSS THE FIELDS OF LATE? ALL THE WOMEN OF THE SHARECROPPER FAMILIES ARE ALREADY WIELDING HOES AND PLOUGHS AND SCYTHES AND WORKING THE LAND! THEY HAVE THEIR HANDS FULL!

GRANDMOTHER!

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CAN IT TRULY BE THAT I AM IN THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE...?

SINCE ENTERING THE CASTLE I HAVE SEEN NOT ONE WOMAN. INSTEAD, ALL THOSE THAT PASS ARE SAMURAI.

'TIS MOST ODD...

tsu

tsu

tsu

tsu

WHAP

BOW YOU DOWN, FOR OUR LIEGE IS COME.

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AT EASE! RAISE THY HEAD!!

DAWDLE NOT WHEN THE SHOGUN COMMANDS THEE. RAISE THY HEAD!

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GULP

VERILY SO, YOUR HIGHNESS.

O-MAN!!

WITH GREAT RESPECT... ...

I AM THE SON OF MADENOKOJI ARIZUMI, AND MY NAME IS ARIKOTO.

HUH?

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WITH THY WHITE SKIN LIKE A MAIDEN'S, A MAIDEN NAME IS MOST BEFITTING FOR THEE—THOU, O-MAN!!

THE FIRST CHARACTER OF MADENOKOJI IS READ "MAN" BY ITSELF, SO THOU ART O-MAN!

THAT... IS MOST IMPERTINENT! OUR LORD HATH...

SSH!

YOUR HIGH-NESS.

THE NAME ARIKOTO... DOTH IT NOT PLEASE YOU?

O-MAN!!

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...!

shwap

shwap

shwap

WHEN I CALL THEE O-MAN, THOU SHALT ANSWER! SAY, "YES, MY LORD"!!

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SAY IT!

SAY IT!!

SAY IT!

SAY, "YES, MY LORD"!!

SAY IT!!

I COMMAND THEE TO SAY IT!!

PLIP

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MASAKATSU! BRING NOT THIS MAN IN FRONT OF ME AGAIN, UNTIL HIS DISFIGURED FACE HATH LOST ITS SWELLING AND BEEN HEALED!

KASUGA! LET US GO!

MY SPORT HATH BEEN SPOILED!

M'LORD!

.....

FWK

YOU MAY RAISE YOUR HEAD, SIR ARIKOTO.

PRAY TELL ME...

WHO, IN SOOTH, WAS THAT PERSONAGE ...?

thud thud thud

87

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THAT PERSON NOW...THAT PERSONAGE I JUST DID MEET...

LORD IEMITSU OUGHT TO BE SEVEN AND THIRTY YEARS OF AGE! SO WHERE THEN IS THE TRUE SHOGUN LORD IEMITSU?!

I COMPREHEND NOT THE MEANING OF YOUR QUESTION.

...WAS SURELY A YOUNG MAIDEN!!

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MOREOVER, THE LORD IEMITSU WITH WHOM I WAS GRANTED AN AUDIENCE UPON MY ARRIVAL IN EDO, AS THE NEW ABBOT OF KE.KO-IN, WAS YOURSELF, SIR. I REMEMBER YOUR VOICE!

BUT THEN, WHO WAS THAT YOUNG LADY WHO DID IMPERSONATE THE SHOGUN TO ME JUST NOW?

...HOWEVER, IT HATH BEEN REPORTED IN THE WORLD OUTSIDE THAT I AM DEAD. YOU MIGHT THEREFORE THINK OF ME AS A STAND-IN FOR HIS HIGHNESS THE SHOGUN.

MY NAME IS INABA MASAKATSU.

THAT YOUNG LADY IS THE DAUGHTER OF THE DECEASED LORD IEMITSU, SIR.

...

'TWAS SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER LORD IEMITSU SUCCEEDED TO THE TITLE OF THIRD TOKUGAWA SHOGUN...

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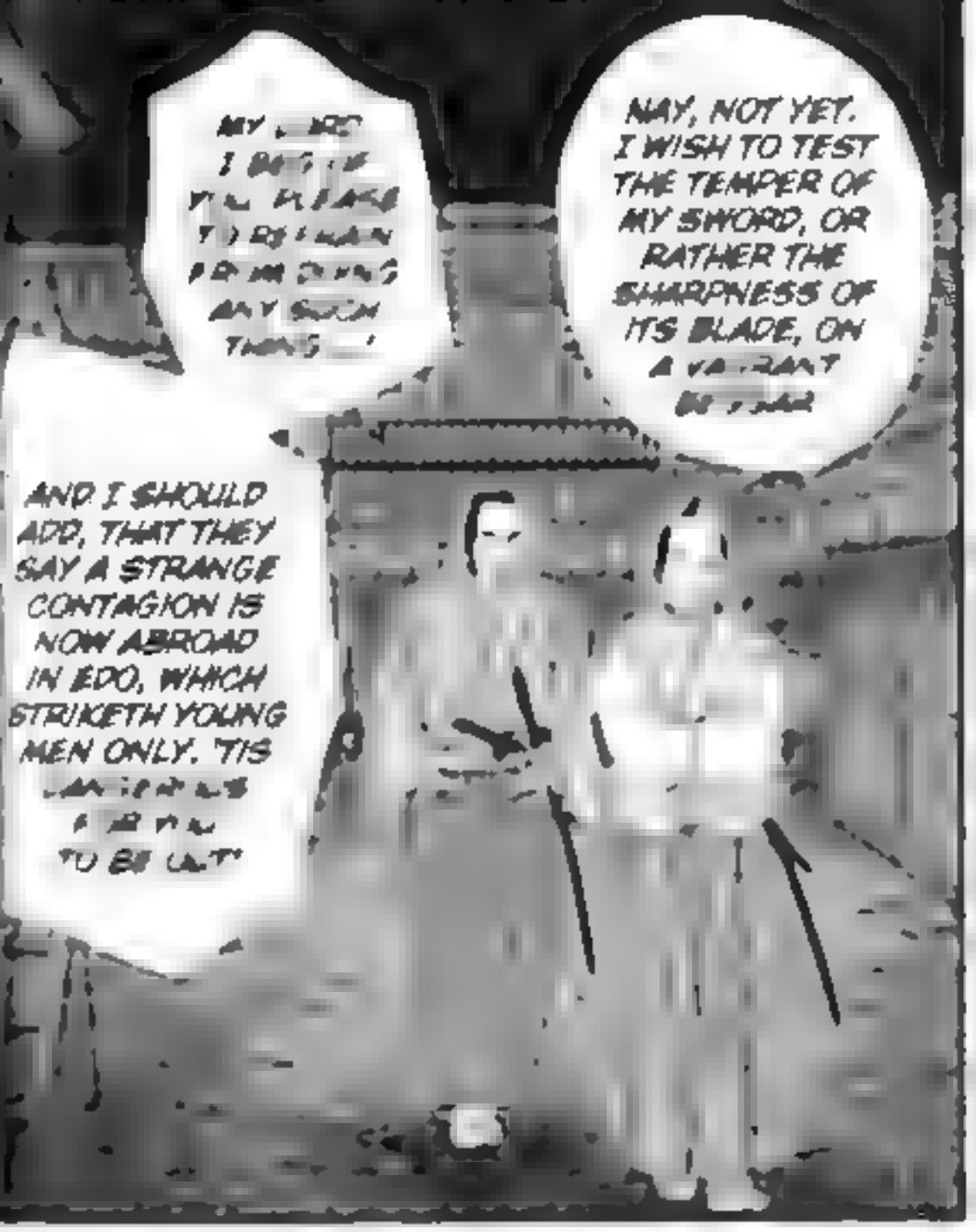
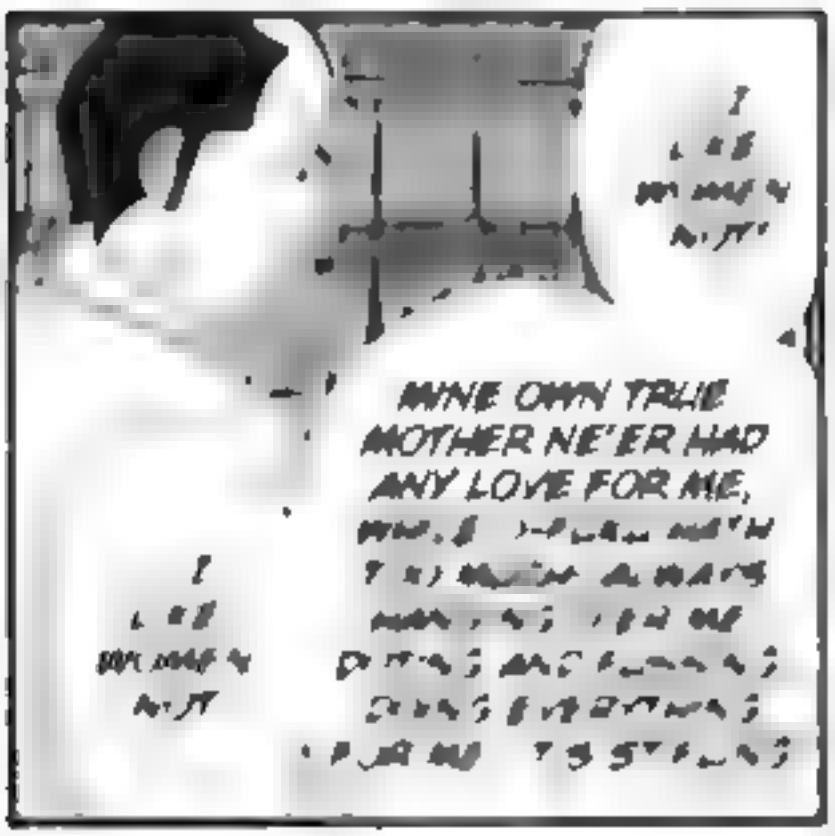
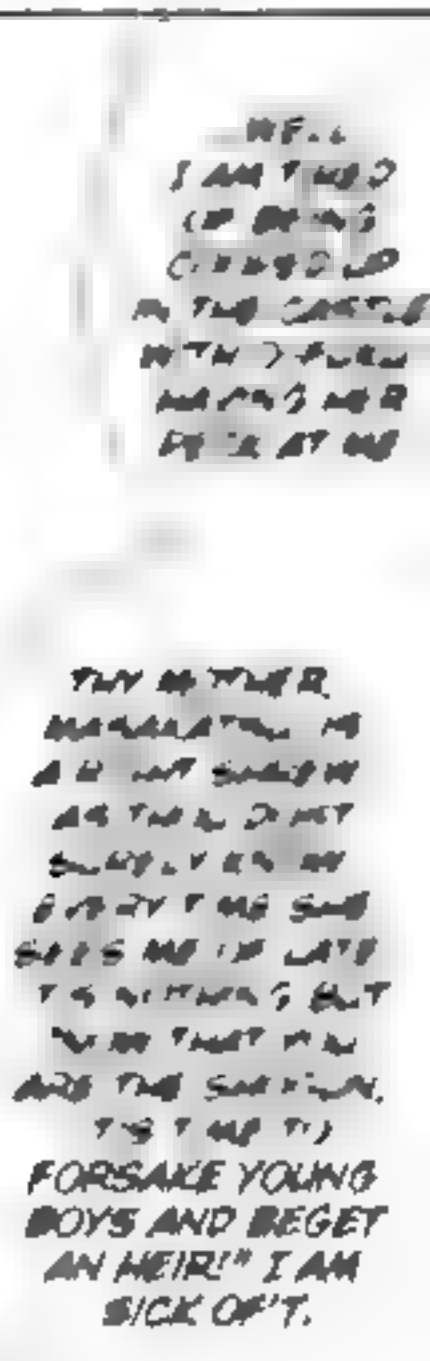

NAY, NOT YET. I WISH TO TEST THE TEMPER OF MY SWORD, OR RATHER THE SHARPNESS OF ITS BLADE, ON A VAGRANT OR TWAIN
AND I SHOULD ADD, THAT THEY SAY A STRANGE CONTAGION IS NOW ABROAD IN EDO, WHICH STRIKETH YOUNG MEN ONLY. 'TIS





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'TIS TRUE THAT LATER, AS A CONSEQUENCE OF HER POSITION, THOU ART BECOME MY ATTENDANT, AND NOW HAST RISEN TO THE POSITION OF FIRST VALET OF THE BEDCHAMBER—BUT I DO BELIEVE THAT HAD THIS NOT COME TO PASS THOU WOULDST LOVE THY MOTHER ANYWAY

BUT THOU, MASAKATSU ART QUITE UNLIKE ME, ART THOU NOT? O-FUKU LEFT THEE, HER YOUNG SON, TO COME TO EDO AND BE MY WET NURSE, YET THOU HAST NO HATE FOR HER IN THY HEART

MASA-KATSU! I HEAR FOOT-STEPS!

OH.

MY LIEGE! I BEG OF YOU, PLEASE DO NOT TEST YOUR SWO—

HMM?

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WHEN YOU SEE ONE LIKE HER, DO YOU NOT APPRECIATE HOW LOVELY AND GRACEFUL WOMEN CAN BE? I SAY THEY ARE, INDEED, MOST DELIGHTFUL.

MY LIEGE.

NOW, MY LORD, LET US RETURN IN PEACE TO THE CASTLE.

'TIS NO SPORT TO TEST MY SWORD ON SO SOFT AND SLIGHT A BODY.

OH. 'TIS BUT A WOMAN.

FORSOOTH, BUT SHE IS A BEAUTY... E'EN IN THIS DARKNESS, 'TIS CLEAR!

I HAVE THOUGHT OF A WAY TO HAVE SOME MERRIMENT, MASAKATSU.

NAY.

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QUIET! BE THOU QUIET, WENCH!

I BEG YOU, SIR. PLEASE, NAAAAYY!!

PRAY, M'LORD I BESEECH YOU!

NAAAAAAYYYY!

THOU SAYEST WOMEN ARE DELIGHTFUL, SO I AM TRYING THIS ONE OUT. THOU SHALT KEEP WATCH TO SEE THAT NOBODY COMETH!

MY LIEGE ...!

IF YE BOTH DO NOT DO AS I DESIRE, I SHALL SIMPLY TEST MY BLADE UPON HER AND DUMP THE BODY! THOU KNOWEST I JEST NOT, MASAKATSU!!

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SORRY, I MAY NOT ''

PROTECT ENDURE IT ''

PRAY HELP ME, GOKU SAMURAI S.R.

HA HA HA HA

HA HA HA HA HA!!

THERE O-FUKU, I CAN BE WITH A WOMAN IF I SO CHOOSE''

I AM THE SHIKIJIN— THERE IS NOTHING IN THIS WORLD I CANNOT DO''

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A YEAR LATER, A WOMAN CAME TO EDO CASTLE HOLDING A BABE IN ARMS...

..

LORD IEMITSU WAS JUST TWENTY YEARS OF AGE AT THE TIME, STILL TOO YOUNG TO BEAR THE HEAVY WEIGHT OF BECOMING SUPREME RULER OF THE REALM.

NOW I HAVE GIVEN BIRTH TO THIS BABE, I CAN NE'ER BE WED...!!

PRITHEE...!! PRITHEE LET ME PASS AND HAVE AN AUDIENCE WITH HIS HIGHNESS...!!

WITH RESPECT, SIR, THE SAMURAI LORD DID SURELY SAY, "I AM THE SHOGUN"—HE SURELY DID!

FIE!! WHAT IMPUDENT NONSENSE DOST THOU DARE SPOUT?!

AND HIS RETAINER DID GIVE ME THIS, HIS SHORT SWORD, AS THEY DEPARTED...

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I KNOW HER NOT.

SURELY YOU HAVE SOME RECOLLECTION OF THIS WOMAN, WHO CALLS HERSELF O-SAI. THE SHORT SWORD SHE PRESENTED WAS WITHOUT A DOUBT THAT OF MASAKATSU!

MY LORD!

AAH, MY LORD, I AM MOST JOYFUL INDEED THAT YOU HAVE BEEN ENTICED TO LIE WITH A WOMAN...!!

I NE'ER HEARD THE NAME BEFORE!

O-SAI? HMPH!

I HAVE NOT ONCE LAIN WITH THE CONSORT I WAS PUT UPON TO TAKE LAST YEAR, SO WHEREFORE WOULD I LIE WITH THIS BASE COMMONER? THE LYING BE HERS ALONE, FOR SHE IS A LOATHSOME LIAR.

AND WHETHER THIS WERE GOOD FORTUNE OR BAD, SINCE THE INFANT WAS A GIRL AND THUS NOT IN LINE FOR THE SUCCESSION, THE INCIDENT WAS HUSHED OVER...

WITH HIS HIGHNESS MOST INSISTENT THAT HE KNEW NOT THIS WOMAN AND HAD NE'ER TOUCHED HER, SHE COULD NOT BE GIVEN AN APARTMENT IN THE INNER CHAMBERS.

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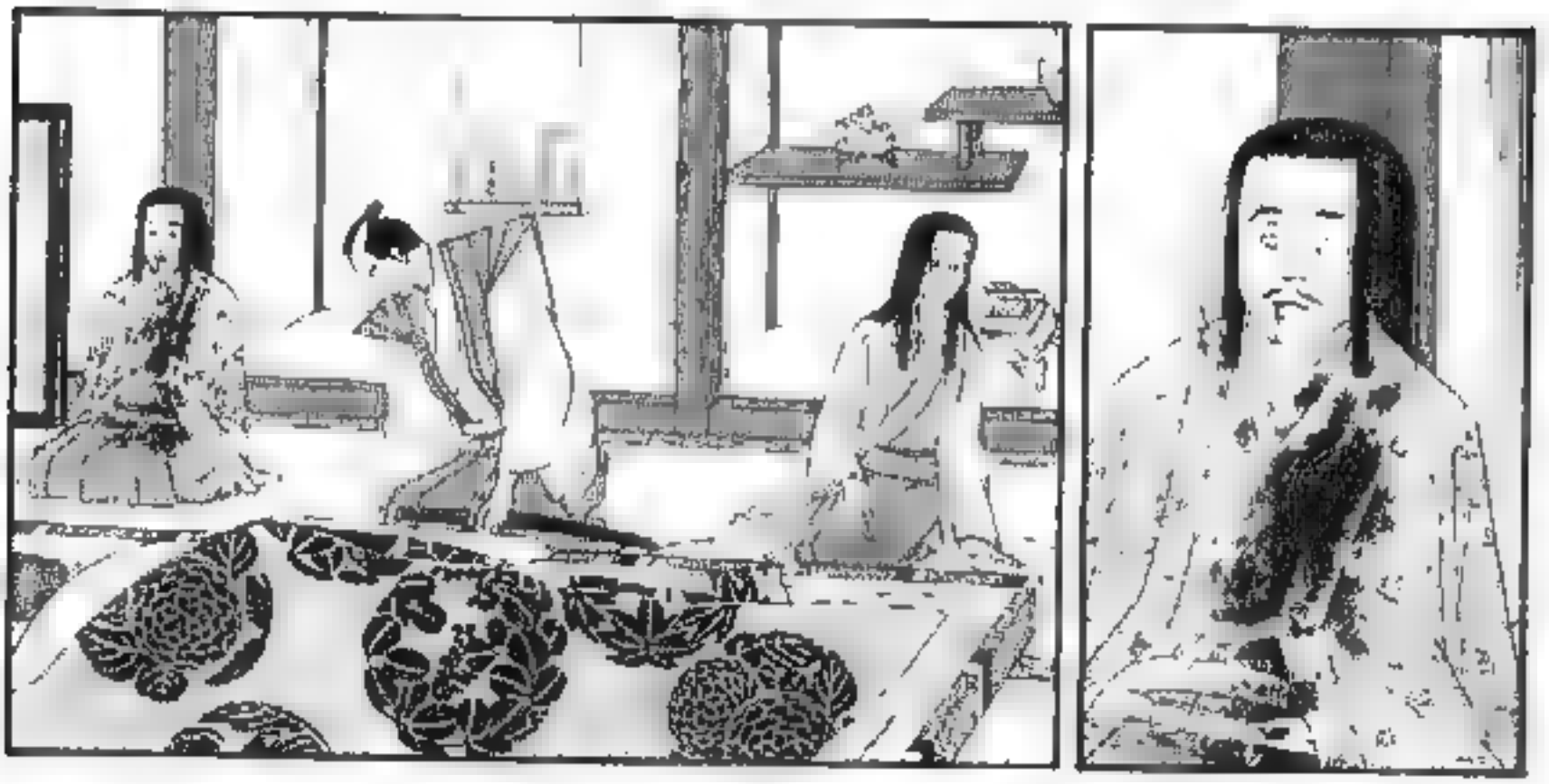
...AND THEN...

...LORD IEMITSU PASSED AWAY, WITHOUT AN HEIR..!!

LADY O-SAI WAS GIVEN A WET NURSE AND A MANSION ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF EDO AT THE BEHEST OF THE REVEREND KASUGA, AND THERE SHE LIVED QUIETLY WITH HER DAUGHTER.



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MOST HONORED MOTHER!!

'TIS TO NO AVAIL TO KILL THE PHYSICIAN AND KEEP ALL OTHERS AWAY. 'TWILL ACCOMPLISH NAUGHT!

WE CANNOT KEEP IT SECRET THAT HIS HIGHNESS HATH PERISHED— 'TIS QUITE SIMPLY IMPOSSIBLE!!

...AND DISPOSE OF IT, QUICKLY...

MASA-KATSU...

TAKE AWAY THE PHYSICIAN'S BODY...

WHAP

INABA MASAKATSU, BARON OF TANGO.

KWIP

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AND A DESCENT ONCE MORE INTO WAR AND CHAOS!

...OF TOKUGAWA RULE...

THE END...

FORGET NOT THAT THOU ART A SAMURAI—AND THAT WARRIORS KEEP THEIR COMPOSURE. THINE AGITATION NOW WAS A DISGRACE! I HAVE TOLD THEE BEFORE, NEVERMORE TO CALL ME MOTHER!

'TIS BUT THIRTY YEARS SINCE HIS EXCELLENCY LORD IEYASU ESTABLISHED THE SHOGUNATE HERE IN EDO. THERE STILL REMAIN MANY PROVINCIAL LORDS WHO NURSE THE AMBITION TO RULE THE WHOLE OF THE COUNTRY.

THE TOKUGAWA CLAN WOULD BE FINISHED. WE MUST, THEREFORE, HAVE LORD IEMITSU REMAIN ALIVE!

AND IF THAT BE NOT ENOUGH OF A THREAT, THE EASTERN PARTS ARE RAVAGED BY THE REDFACE POX! IF LARGE ARMIES ATTACKED EDO FROM THE WESTERN REGIONS, WHERE THE PESTILENCE HATH NOT YET REACHED, THEN HOW WOULD WE DEFEND OUR CASTLE, WITH SO FEW MEN LEFT?

DOST THOU TRULY UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS FOR LORD IEMITSU TO PERISH NOW, WITHOUT LEAVING AN HEIR?!

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AND THIS BODY HERE DOTH BELONG TO INABA MASAKATSU, FIRSTBORN SON OF LADY KASUGA, WHO DID MOST SUDDENLY DIE FROM THE REDFACE POX!

THOU, MASAKATSU, ART DEAD TODAY FOR THE SAKE OF THE TOKUGAWA CLAN!!

THOU SHALT DIE IN HIS STEAD.

'TIS VERILY SO, BUT OUR LIEGE IS ALREADY DEAD!!

PRESUMPTUOUS THOUGH IT BE, THOU SHALT DON HIS HIGHNESS'S ROBES, WRAP BANDAGES AROUND THY FACE, AND LIE HERE UPON HIS BED!

BUT...!!

That night,
Lady Kasuga
secretly sent for the
Senior Councillor
Matsudaira Nobutsuna,
Baron of Izu

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AH, BUT HE HAD, SIR NOBUTSUNA.

...WHEN OUR HIGHNESS HAD NOT ANY CHILDREN?! I FAIL TO SEE—

WITH GREAT RESPECT, LADY KASUGA, HOW CAN WE KEEP COVERT THE DEATH OF OUR LORD IEMITSU UNTIL SUCH TIME AS HIS SUCCESSOR COMETH OF AGE...

...!

BUT THIS MEANS THAT THE MALE BLOODLINE OF THE TOKUGAWA DYNASTY SHALL ONCE BE BROKEN!

THIS DAUGHTER IS NOW ELEVEN YEARS OF AGE, BUT SHE SHALL IN TIME BE WED, AND GIVE BIRTH TO AN HEIR!

OUR LIEGE DID IN FACT HAVE A DAUGHTER, THAT HE BEGAT WITH A WENCH IN TOWN.

THE YOUNG DAUGHTER OF WHOM I SPEAK IS THE SOLE PERSON ALIVE TODAY WHO CAN PASS THE BLOOD OF THE TOKUGAWA DOWN TO FUTURE GENERATIONS!

EVERY LAST SON OF LORD HOSHINA MASAYUKI, THE ONE REMAINING BROTHER OF LORD IEMITSU, HATH PERISHED FROM THE REDFACE POX. THESE ARE NOT ORDINARY TIMES!!

AND THAT IS PRECISELY WHY, SIR NOBUTSUNA, WE MUST PROCEED WITH THE UTMOST SECRECY!!

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...that the bloodline Lady Kasuga was so intent on preserving was not so much that of the Tokugawa clan as that of her darling, Lord Iemitsu

While marveling to himself at the canniness of this most rare and formidable woman, Nobutsuna could not help but notice...

Be that as it may, he had no choice but to go along with her plan...

ONE THING THAT NEEDS BE DONE, HOWEVER, IS TO RESTRICT THE ENTRY OF FOREIGN VESSELS TO THE PORT OF NAGASAKI ONLY. ALSO, FORBID ALL JAPANESE FROM VOYAGING TO FOREIGN LANDS, UPON PAIN OF DEATH.

...INDEED.

IF IT APPEARS THAT THE TOKUGAWA DYNASTY CONTINUES, THEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE COUNTRY CAN CONTINUE ALSO, FOR OUR BUREAUCRACY FUNCTIONS MOST SMOOTHLY.

HUH?

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THE PRETEXT WILL BE THE EXCLUSION OF CHRISTIAN PROSELYTIZERS AND A GOVERNMENT MONOPOLY ON FOREIGN TRADE. USE THESE AS THE REASON TO CLOSE OFF THE COUNTRY FROM THE WORLD BEYOND OUR SHORES.

THIS PLAGUE OF THE REDFACE POX DOTH LAST TOO LONG. THE NUMBER OF MEN IN THIS COUNTRY SHALL, FOR THE TIME BEING, BE MUCH DECREASED. SHOULD THOSE IN FOREIGN LANDS LEARN OF THIS STATE OF AFFAIRS, JAPAN SHALL BE BESET WITH TROUBLES NOT ONLY FROM WITHIN BUT ALSO FROM WITHOUT. LET US NIP WHAT WE CAN IN THE BUD.

...that in the eyes of this woman who had lived through the previous era of constant warfare, not just he and the other Senior Councilors but all of the shoganate's ministers were little more than innocent babes.

Nobu-Isuna suddenly realized...

ALL WHAT I HAVE NOW RELATED TOOK PLACE SIX YEARS AGO.

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WHEREFORE DO YOU SAY OUR *LORD*?! IF SHE BE THE DAUGHTER OF LORD IEMITSU, SHE IS MOST SURELY A LADY!

YOUR DUTY HENCEFORTH SHALL BE TO BEGET AN HEIR WITH OUR LORD SO THAT THE TOKUGAWA DYNASTY MAY FLOURISH!

...IS TO SERVE AS SEED STOCK.

THEN...

THE REASON I HAVE BEEN BROUGHT HERE TO THE INNER CHAMBERS...

I HAD HEARD...

YOU SHALL THEREFORE CALL HER "MY LORD," OR "MY LIEGE," OR "YOUR HIGHNESS."

A WOMANLY NAME CANNOT BE ADMITTED INTO THE RECORDS AS HEAD OF THE TOKUGAWA FAMILY, AND INDEED LORD IEMITSU IS ON THE FACE OF IT STILL ALIVE AND WELL. THUS SHE IS SOMEBODY WHO SHOULD NOT IN SOOTH EXIST IN THIS WORLD AT ALL.

SHE HATH NO OTHER TITLE, NOR EVEN A NAME.

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'TIS TRUE THAT THE INNER CHAMBERS WERE ESTABLISHED TO HOUSE LADIES WHO MIGHT GIVE BIRTH TO THE SHOGUN'S HEIR.

THE SHOGUN, HOWEVER, IS NO MORE, SO WE HAVE NO NEED OF THE LADIES. AND WOMEN DO TALK TOO MUCH.

...THAT THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE WERE THE RESIDENCE OF LADIES WHO SERVE THE SHOGUN.

WHEREFORE IS IT, THEN, THAT I HAVE SEEN NOT ONE LADY?!

WITH SO FEW MEN LEFT HERE IN KANTO FROM THE REDFACE POX, WE HAVE NOT THE MEANS TO RAISE AN ARMY...

IN THEIR PLACE, WE HAVE GATHERED HERE YOUNG LORDLESS SAMURAI FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY.

IF FOR ANY REASON THE TRUTH SHOULD GET OUT AND THE NATION DESCEND INTO CHAOS, EDO COULD WELL BE ATTACKED.

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THE INNER CHAMBERS ARE TODAY THE LAST FORTRESS WITHIN THE FORTRESS THAT IS EDO CASTLE...

...WHERE AN ARMY OF YOUNG WARRIORS STAND AT THE READY TO PROTECT THE TOKUGAWA CLAN FROM ENEMY ASSAULT.

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DRESSED IN THAT MANNER, SHE CAN MOVE FREELY IN AND OUT OF THE SHOGUN'S PERSONAL QUARTERS, AND THE MEN WILL THINK ONLY THAT SHE IS HIS CATAMITE.

OUR LORD HATH JUST ONE PERSONAL ATTENDANT IN THESE INNER CHAMBERS, AND THAT IS THE REVEREND KASUGA HERSELF.

THE WARRIORS THAT HAVE BEEN HEREIN COLLECTED FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE CASTLE KNOW NOT OF LORD IEMITSU'S DEMISE. THAT IS WHY OUR LORD WEARS THE ROBES AND HAIRSTYLE OF A MAN.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE JOINED THEIR SELECT COMPANY, YOU MAY NEVERMORE LEAVE THESE INNER CHAMBERS, BUT SHALL RESIDE HERE UNTIL THE END OF YOUR LIFE!

THE FACT THAT THE CURRENT SHOGUN BE A YOUNG MAIDEN IS KNOWN ONLY TO A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE, EVEN AMONG THE MOST EXALTED MINISTERS OF GOVERNMENT.

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YOU HAVE OFT SAID THAT YOU WOULD NE'ER TAKE A ROUGH, UNCOUTH MAN FOR YOUR BRIDEGROOM, AND IN SOOTH HAVE VEXED ME MUCH WITH YOUR OBDURACY. BUT ONE SO HANDSOME AS THIS, I BELIEVE, DOTH SUIT YOUR FANCY?

HOW DID THE YOUNG NOBLE I FOUND PLEASE YOU, YOUR HIGHNESS?

...

...

SO HE HATH PLEASED YOUR HIGHNESS ENOUGH THAT YOU ARE ALREADY THINKING OF A "NEXT TIME"?

HO.

TEACH HIM TO ANSWER PROMPTLY WHEN ADDRESSED ERE THE NEXT TIME HE COMETH BEFORE ME! HE IS QUITE A MULISH FELLOW!

HMPH!

HE MADE NOT ONE SOUND WHILST I WAS STRIKING HIM.

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I SHALL TEND TO IT AT ONCE!! WHO...WHO HATH DONE THIS TO YOU...?!

...

YOUR FACE IS MOST BADLY BRUISED, SIR. HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?!

MASTER ARIKOTO!

PRAY TELL YOUR VALET THE TRUTH, IN ALL HONESTY. 'TIS ANYWAY SOMETHING HE SHALL FIND OUT BY AND BY.

OH.

NAY... 'TWAS NOT... HM, I KNOW NOT WHAT TO SAY. I KNOW NOT HOW MUCH I CAN TELL THEE...

shu

I DO NOT...LIKE TO THINK.. THAT LORD IEMITSU TRIED TO COMPEL YOU TO...

MASTER ARIKOTO...

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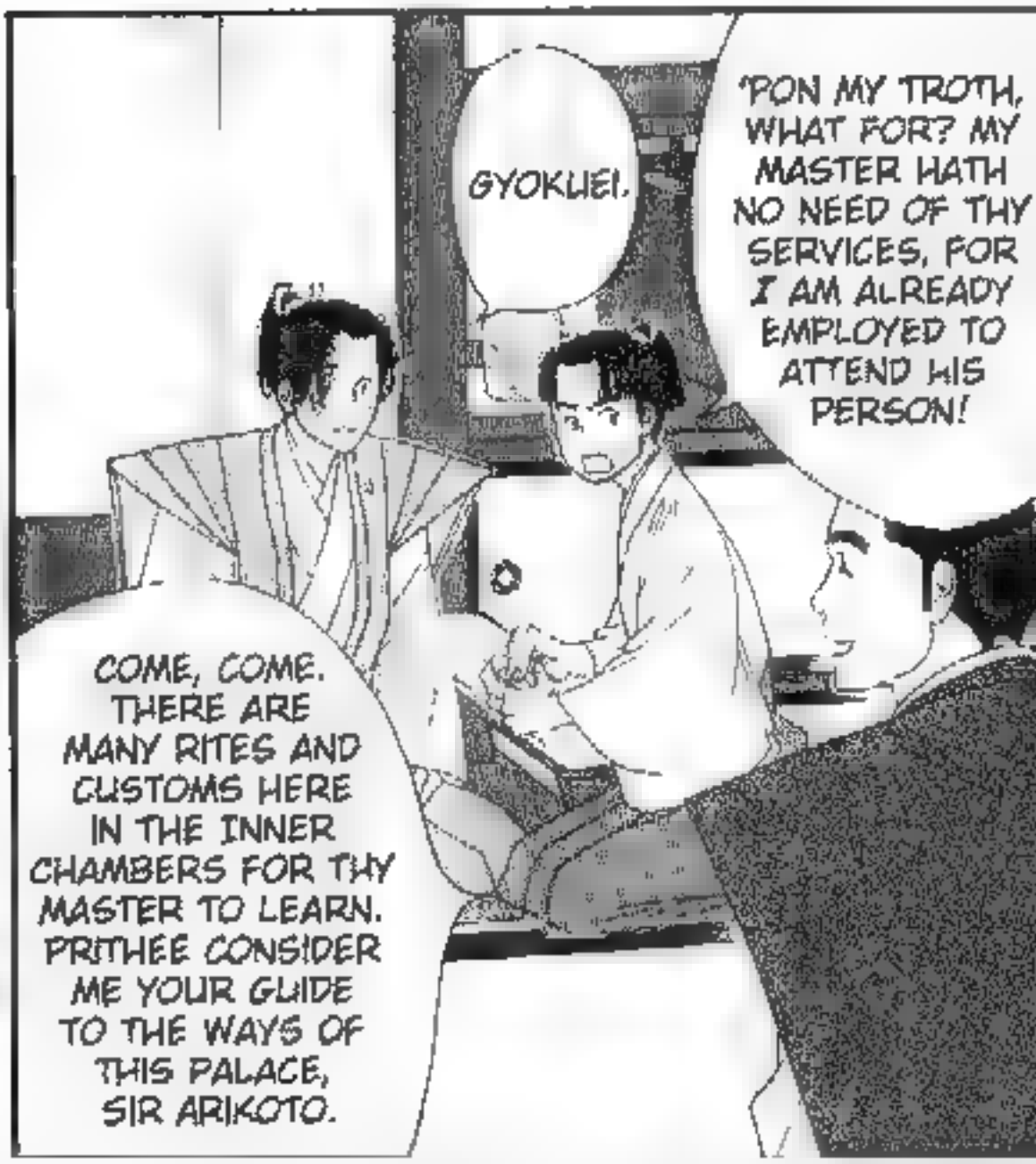
NEITHER I NOR GYOKUEI HATH A CLUE AS TO HOW TO GET AROUND THIS PLACE, AND BE IGNORANT OF ITS RULES OF CONDUCT.
AYE.
PRAY COUNSEL US BOTH.


GYOKUEI.
'PON MY TROTH, WHAT FOR? MY MASTER HATH NO NEED OF THY SERVICES, FOR I AM ALREADY EMPLOYED TO ATTEND HIS PERSON!
COME, COME. THERE ARE MANY RITES AND CUSTOMS HERE IN THE INNER CHAMBERS FOR THY MASTER TO LEARN. PRITHEE CONSIDER ME YOUR GUIDE TO THE WAYS OF THIS PALACE, SIR ARIKOTO.

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WELL THEN, I ALREADY HAVE SOMETHING I DESIRE THEE TO DO FOR ME.

I SHALL DO MY UTMOST TO BE OF SERVICE, AND BEG PARDON BEFOREHAND FOR MY FAILINGS, OF WHICH THERE ARE MANY, I AM SURE.

AND WHAT IS THAT, MASTER?

I HAVE WRITTEN LETTERS TO MY FAMILY IN KYOTO AND TO KEIKO-IN, TO ASSURE THEM I AM SAFE HERE IN EDO CASTLE, AND WISH THEE TO ENSURE THEY ARE DELIVERED.

...THAT I MAY NOT DO.

BUT THEY HAVE RECEIVED WORD OF YOUR SAFETY, SIR. YOUR FAMILY HATH ALREADY RECEIVED THE PARTICULARS IN A LETTER FROM THE GOVERNMENT.

I HAVE NO INTENTION OF TRYING TO ESCAPE! I WISH ONLY TO EASE THE ANXIETY OF THOSE WHO CARE FOR ME, YET HAVE RECEIVED NO WORD OF MY SAFETY THESE PAST SIX MONTHS!

WHERE-FORE NOT?!

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QUOTH HE, "A SON THAT HATH TAKEN RELIGIOUS VOWS HATH CUT HIS TIES TO THE WORLD, OF WHICH HIS FAMILY IS PART, SO HIS DOINGS ARE NO LONGER MY AFFAIR. HOWEVER, FOR THE INTERESTS OF THE FAMILY, 'TIS BETTER THAT HE SERVE THE SHOGUN AS HIS CATAMITE, THAN A MONASTERY AS ITS ABBOT."

'TWAS BUT A PITTANCE, BUT THE SHOGUNATE DID ALSO MAKE A GIFT OF SOME GOLD AT THE SAME TIME, AND I HAVE HEARD THAT YOUR HONORED FATHER, DUKE ARIZUMI, WAS EXCEEDINGLY PLEASED TO RECEIVE IT.

AS FOR KEIKO-IN, MASTER ARIKOTO...

MY FATHER IS NOT EVIL IN CHARACTER, BUT THERE IS A CALCULATING SIDE TO HIS NATURE...

'TIS TRUE, WHAT HE DOTH RELATE.

TUT, GYOKUEI.

THOU VILLAIN, THOU LIEST!!

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU WISH ME TO DO, SIR?

THE MONASTERY TOO WAS NOTIFIED SEVERAL MONTHS AGO THAT YOU WOULD REMAIN IN EDO, AND A NEW ABBOT WAS APPOINTED SOON THEREAFTER.

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THEN ALLOW ME TO MAKE OF *YOU* A REQUEST.

THIS IS EDO, SIR! PRAY REFRAIN FORTHWITH FROM USING THE EFFEMINATE COURT LANGUAGE OF KYOTO THAT YOU HAVE BEEN SPEAKING, FOR IT IS IN SOOTH MOST OBNOXIOUS!!

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HE SAID, "INDEED, I WELL SEE THE SENSE OF WHAT THOU SAYEST, AND SHALL HENCEFORTH USE THE SAMURAI LANGUAGE OF EDO."

...HIS SPEECH BORE NOT THE SLIGHTEST TRACE OF THE KYOTO MANNER, AND WAS IN SOOTH MOST FLUENT.

NAY.

TO THE CONTRARY, MY LADY, HE DID SMILE AND RESPOND MOST PROMPTLY.

SO, MASASUKE. HOW DID THY GENTLE MASTER TAKE THY STERN REQUEST? HE WAS QUITE CRESTFALLEN, I DO WAGER, AND INDEED SPEECHLESS.

HMPH.

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Ōoku

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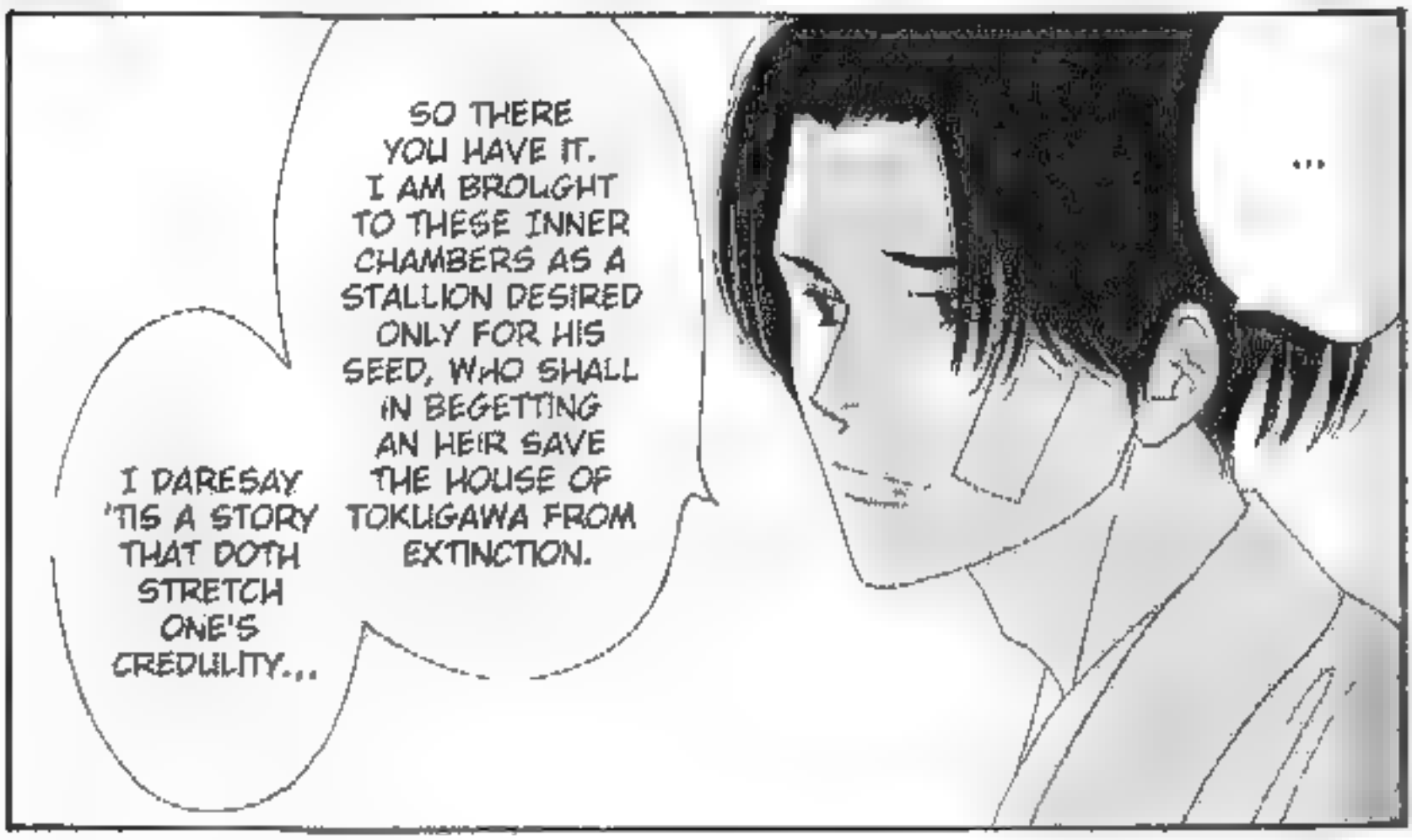
SO THERE YOU HAVE IT. I AM BROUGHT TO THESE INNER CHAMBERS AS A STALLION DESIRED ONLY FOR HIS SEED, WHO SHALL IN BEGETTING AN HEIR SAVE THE HOUSE OF TOKUGAWA FROM EXTINCTION.
I DARESAY 'TIS A STORY THAT DOTH STRETCH ONE'S CREDULITY...
...

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I HAVE WRONGED THEE MOST TERRIBLY, GYOKUEI...!

NOT ONLY MAYST THOU NE'ER AGAIN RETURN TO KYOTO, BUT THOU CANST NEVERMORE TAKE ONE STEP OUT OF THESE INNER CHAMBERS FOR THE REST OF THY DAYS.

NAY, YOUR HONOR!

...NAY.

LORD ARIKOTO IS INDEED A MOST WORTHY CONSORT FOR THE DAUGHTER OF THE SHOGUN... THIS IS WHY LADY KASUGA WAS SO INSISTANT THAT HE LAY WITH A COURTESAN! SHE WISHED TO BE SURE THAT HE KNEW A WOMAN'S BODY...!

WHAT PAINS ME MOST OF ALL IS THAT I HAVE BROUGHT THEE WITH ME HERE TO SHARE MY SORRY FATE...!

GYOKUEI.

...THAT HAD YOU NOT BROUGHT ME WITH YOU TO THE INNER CHAMBERS, I WOULD NOW BE DEAD, SLAIN BY THE SAME SWORD AS FRIAR MYOKEI.

INDEED, I AM SURE...

...FORSOOTH, SIR ARIKOTO, I AM MOST ASTOUNDED BY MY GOOD FORTUNE IN ACCOMPANYING YOU HERE, MASTER.

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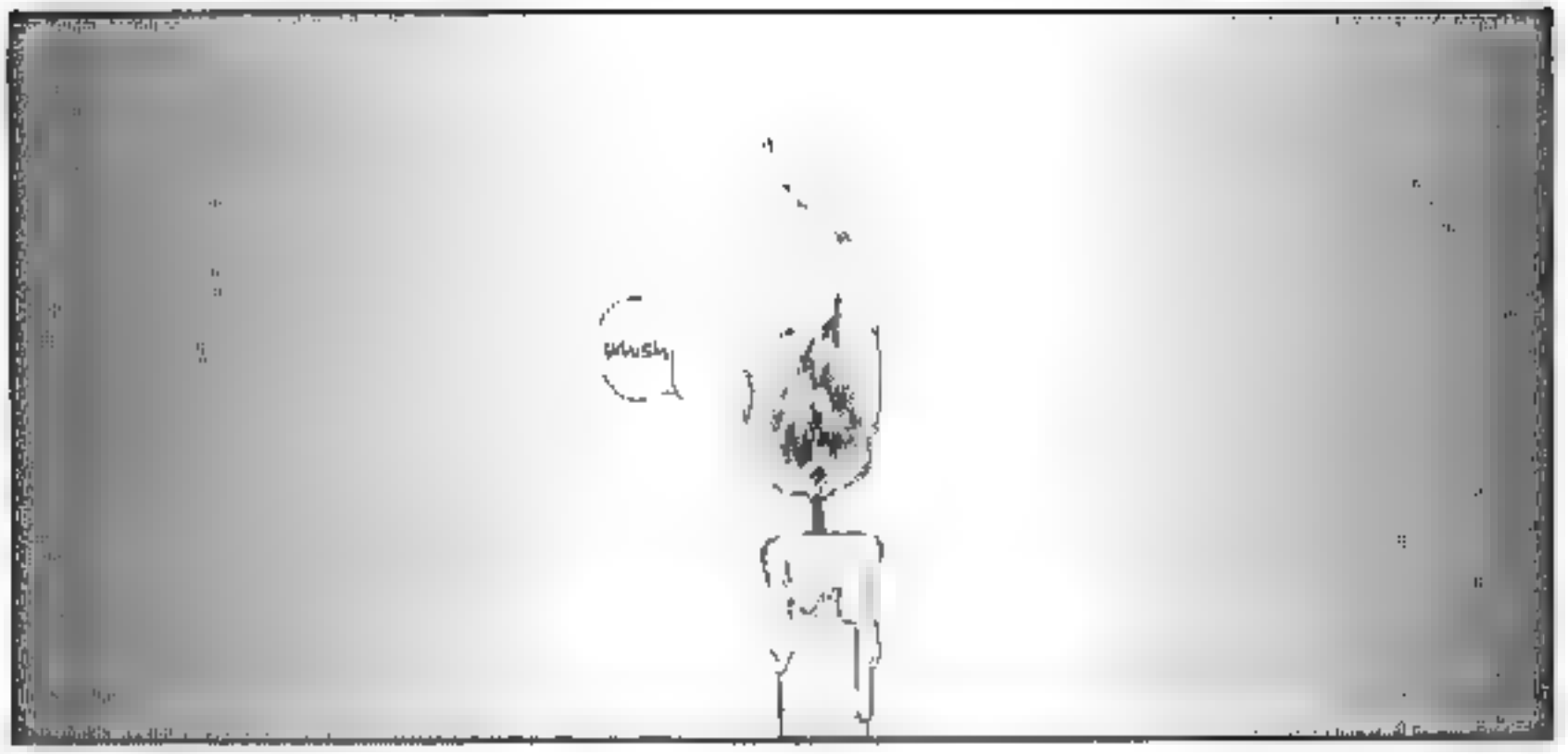

GYOKUEI...
I SHALL FOLLOW YOU ALWAYS, MASTER ARIKOTO, WHITHERSOEVER YOU SHOULD GO. FOR THAT IS SURELY MY TRUE PATH IN LIFE!
I AM NOT READY TO FACE DEATH, NOT YET!

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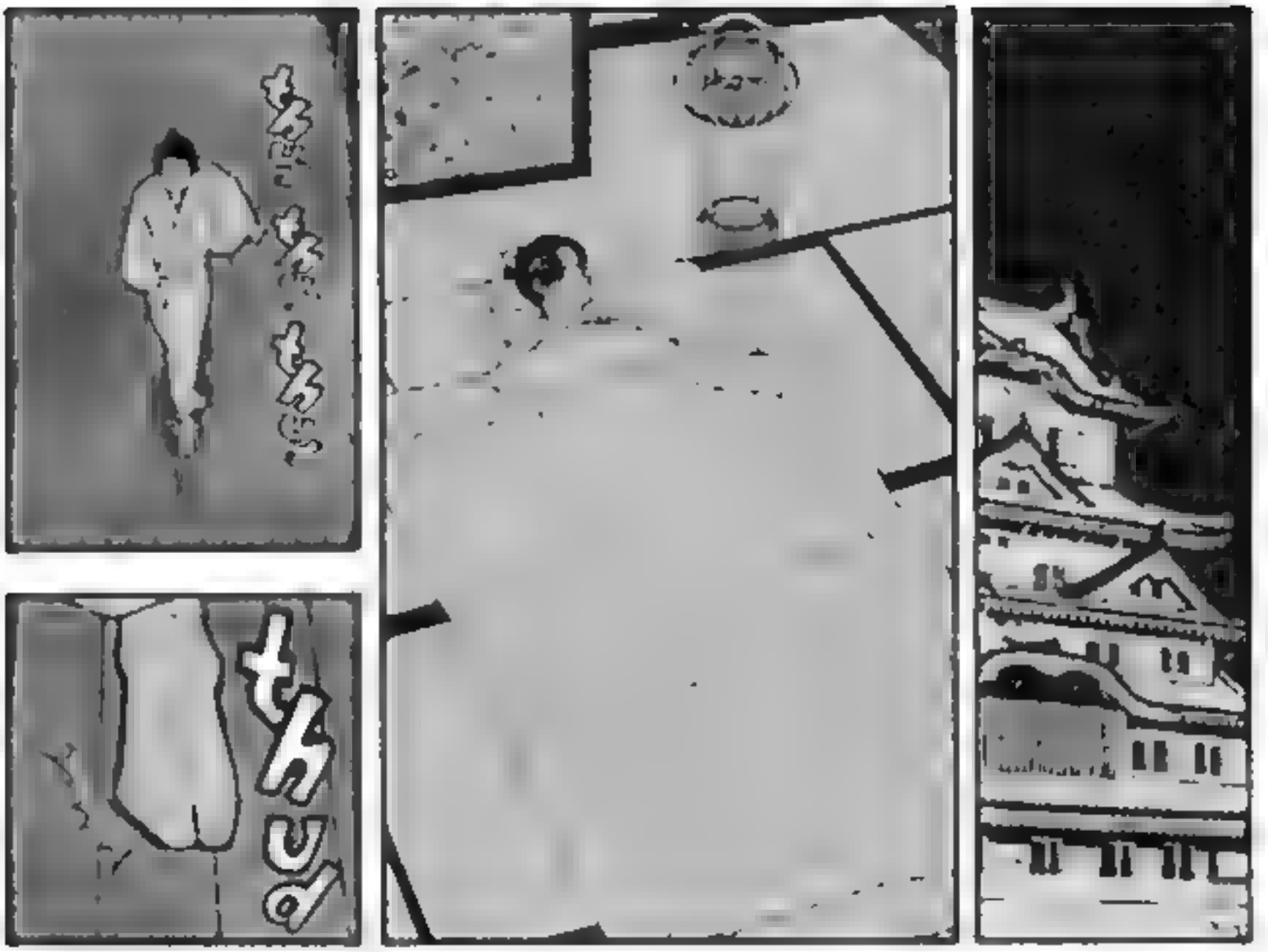

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'TWAS MEWLING OUTSIDE MY BEDCHAMBER. I GIVE IT TO THEE.

TAKE IT.

SNEW

OH!

MEOWW

OH, NAY, GYOKUEI, 'TWAS NOTHING...

...OR, WELL, 'TWAS SOMETHING... THAT IS TO SAY...

...'TIS A KITTEN...

SIR ARIKOTO?

I DID HEAR SOME NOISE JUST NOW!

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'TIS DUE TO THY TENDER CARE, GYOKUEI.

ARE THEY?

I AM MOST RELIEVED TO SEE THE SWELLING AND BRUISING ARE FINALLY RECEDED.

MEOW

CHRP CHRP

ART THOU HUNGRY? SHALL I BRING THEE A TIDBIT FROM THE KITCHENS, HMM?

WHAT IS'T, MURASAKI?

COME, GYOKUEI! WE ARE NOW DENIZENS OF THE SECULAR WORLD. AND SINCE WE FIND OURSELVES IN A PLACE SO LACKING IN FEMALE COMPANY, LET THE NAME OF OUR CAT, AT LEAST, BE COQUETTISH.

BUT SURELY 'TIS TOO ALLURING A NAME FOR A MERE KITTEN!

I KNEW'T, THAT MY MASTER DOTH MUCH ENJOY THE COMPANY OF WOMEN!

HA HA HA

BY YOUR LEAVE, SIR ARIKOTO, 'TIS I, MASASUKE.

DOST THOU THINK SO? SHE IS PRETTY AND MOST CHARMING, SO I THOUGHT IT APT. IS'T NOT AN APT NAME FOR THEE, EH, MURASAKI?

'TIS A MOST FINE AND ELEGANT NAME INDEED THAT YOU HAVE GIVEN THIS KITTEN, SIR ARIKOTO.

MEOW

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I AM COME TODAY TO INTRODUCE YOU TO THE GROOMS OF THE BEDCHAMBER, SIR ARIKOTO.

PRAY BE NOT SO WARY OF ME, MASTER!

GROOMS OF THE BED-CHAMBER?

...'TIS A TITLE WITHIN THE INNER CHAMBERS AND AN EXALTED RANK INDEED— ALTHOUGH IT WAS UNTIL RECENTLY "*LADIES* OF THE BEDCHAMBER," FOR THESE WERE LADIES-IN-WAITING WHO SERVED THE SHOGUN HIMSELF, AND 'TWAS FROM THEIR NUMBER THAT HE SHOULD CHOOSE HIS CONCUBINES...

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SO I AM NOT THE ONLY ONE BROUGHT HERE FOR THIS PURPOSE?

THIS SERVED AS THE EXAMPLE FOR THE REVEREND KASUGA TO GIVE THE TITLE "GROOM OF THE BEDCHAMBER" TO THE MEN SHE HATH GATHERED HERE, FROM WHOSE NUMBER OUR LORD SHALL TAKE A BRIDEGROOM.

PERHAPS THAT IS SO, BUT IN SOOTH, NONE THAT HATH BEEN BROUGHT BEFORE OUR LORD SO FAR HATH PLEASED HER. SHE HATH REJECTED THEM ALL.

THEN WHEREFORE WAS I COERCED TO COME? SURELY THE SCION OF A WARRIOR FAMILY BE FAR MORE SUITABLE A BRIDEGROOM FOR OUR LIEGE.

NOT ONE OF THEM HAS A PEDIGREE EVEN HALF AS NOBLE AS YOURS, SIR ARIKOTO.

SO, WHILE THEY ARE OF SOUND SAMURAI STOCK, THEY ARE THE SECOND AND THIRD SONS OF CONCUBINES, OUTSIDE THE MAIN LINEAGE...

AND YET, HAVING BEEN BROUGHT BEFORE HER, THEY ARE NOW PRIVY TO THE SECRET AND THUS FATED TO REMAIN HERE IN THE INNER CHAMBERS FOR THE REST OF THEIR DAYS.

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SIRS, MAY I PRESENT TO YOU SIR ARIKOTO, SCION OF DUKE MADENOKOJI ARIZUMI.

!!

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SO THOU ART THIS FORMER FRIAR WHO WAS OFFERED GOLD TO RENOUNCE HIS SACRED VOWS AND DID SO MOST GREEDILY?
AS I AM STILL UNACCUSTOMED TO THE WAYS OF THESE CHAMBERS, I MAY WELL CAUSE OFFENSE MOST UNWITTINGLY, FOR WHICH I BEG YOUR FORGIVENESS IN ADVANCE.

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HMPH! 'TIS TRUE, THOU ART HAND-SOME...

...IN A MOST DELICATE, SIMPERING MANNER. SO I SEE, THIS IS THE TYPE OF MAN OUR LORD FAVORS.

WELL, IF THOU BE SO SUMMONED, BE THOU MOST CAREFUL. IF THOU SHOULD DISPLEASE OUR LORD, IT MAY HAPPEN THAT SHE WILL SLAY THEE ON THE SPOT.

WHAT...?

AYE, BUT THIS FELLOW HATH NOT YET BEEN SUMMONED TO THE BEDCHAMBER OF OUR LORD, HATH HE, SIR SHIGESATO?

'TIS INDEED A PITY. YOUNG MAIDS KNOW NOT WHAT A TRUE MAN IS!

THE REASONS SHE GAVE WERE, I HEARD, THAT THE MAN WAS MOST CLUMSY, AND THAT HE HAD CAUSED INJURY TO HER PERSON.

'TIS WHISPERED THAT THREE YEARS AGO OUR LORD SMOTE DEAD BY HER OWN HAND THE MAN THAT DID BREAK HER MAIDENHEAD.

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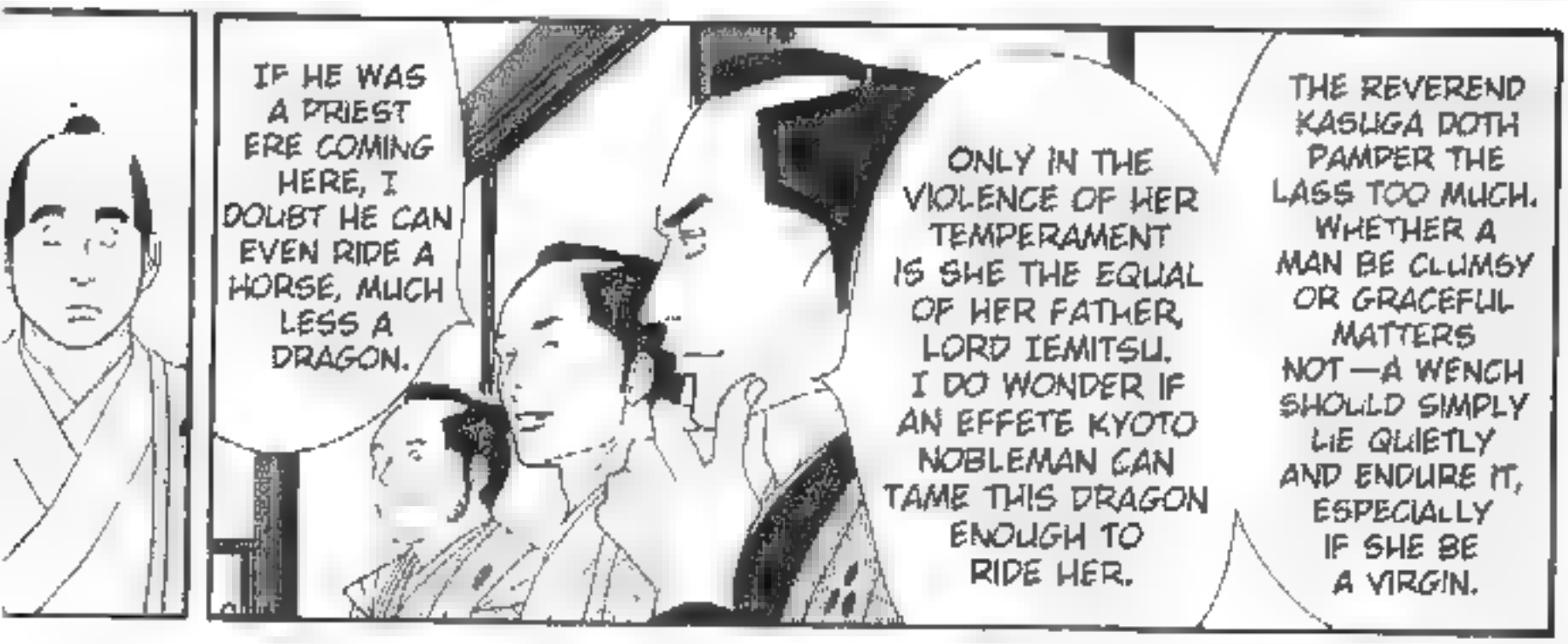
IF HE WAS A PRIEST ERE COMING HERE, I DOUBT HE CAN EVEN RIDE A HORSE, MUCH LESS A DRAGON.
ONLY IN THE VIOLENCE OF HER TEMPERAMENT IS SHE THE EQUAL OF HER FATHER, LORD IEMITSU. I DO WONDER IF AN EFFETE KYOTO NOBLEMAN CAN TAME THIS DRAGON ENOUGH TO RIDE HER.
THE REVEREND KASUGA DOTH PAMPER THE LASS TOO MUCH. WHETHER A MAN BE CLUMSY OR GRACEFUL MATTERS NOT—A WENCH SHOULD SIMPLY LIE QUIETLY AND ENDURE IT, ESPECIALLY IF SHE BE A VIRGIN.

THOU SAYEST TRUE! 'TWILL BE LIKE TWO WENCHES LYING TOGETHER IN THE BED!
AH, SO THEN, WHEN HE GOES TO LIE WITH OUR LORD, THEY SHALL BOTH FLOP ON THE BED LIKE TWO TUNA, NEITHER ONE KNOWING WHAT TO DO!
Pfft!
AS PRETTY AS HE IS, I WAGER HE WAS THE PLAYTHING OF THE PRIORS IN HIS BOYHOOD— BEING THE ONE WHO WAS RODE, NOT WHO DID THE RIDING!
INDEED, INDEED!

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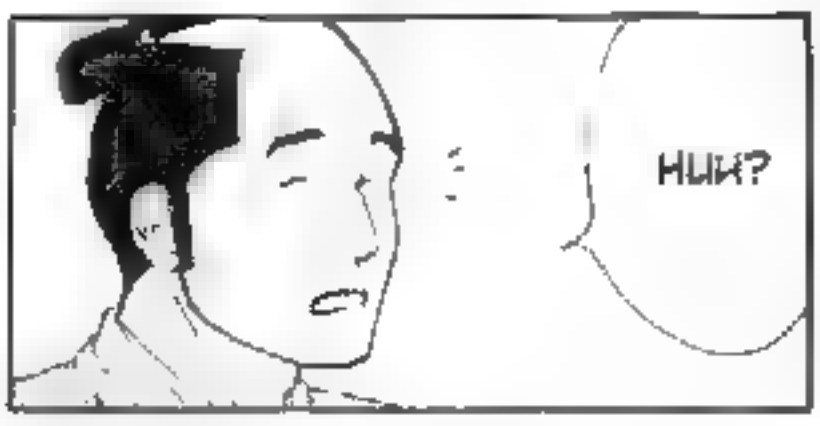

I MUST CONFESS, I AM MOST ASTONISHED TO FIND THAT YOU SAMURAI CHATTER AND PRATTLE NO LESS THAN THE LADIES-IN-WAITING OF THE IMPERIAL COURT!
NAY, 'TWAS MY UNDERSTANDING THAT THE MEN OF WARRIOR FAMILIES ARE QUITE RESERVED AND SPARING OF WORDS.

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SO FEAR NOT, FOR I DO NOT MEET WITH OUR LORD'S FAVOR. BUT I WAS NEVER YOUR ENEMY TO BEGIN WITH ANYWAY, GOOD SIRS.

YOU HAVE NO NEED OF ANXIETY. UPON MY FIRST AUDIENCE WITH OUR LORD, I DID INCUR HER WRATH WITH MY DISCOURTESY, AND WAS BEATEN MOST SEVERELY WITH HER FOLDING FAN.

OUR LIEGE IS A LADY OF GREAT PRIDE AND DIGNITY, AND IF YOU VIEW HER AS A MERE LASS, I CAN WELL IMAGINE THAT SHOULD YOU LET SO MUCH AS A SHADOW OF THAT THOUGHT CROSS YOUR COUNTENANCE, SHE WOULD PERCEIVE YOUR DISRESPECT IN AN INSTANT.

HOW-EVER...

SAY WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT ME, FOR IT MATTERS NOT. BUT I DARESAY THAT TO COMPARE HER HIGHNESS OUR LORD TO A DRAGON AND TO SPEAK OF TAMING AND RIDING HER IS CONDUCT FROM WHICH YOU OUGHT TO REFRAIN FORTHWITH!

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MY INTENTION WAS TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE AND SOON DEPART, BUT IT APPEARS I HAVE LINGERED TOO LONG. PRAY EXCUSE ME.

INDEED, I MUST AGREE I AM.

THOU DAREST INSTRUCT US, THOU SAUCY FELLOW?! THOU ART MOST INSOLENT, I SAY!!

AHH, THOUGH, I MUST SAY...HE IS UNCOMMONLY HANDSOME. THINK YE THAT ALL THE COURT NOBLES OF KYOTO ARE LIKE HIM?

We cannot win on any that!

THOU WRETCHED IGNORAMUS, 'TIS FROM THE ANALECTS OF CONFUCIUS! AND IT CONTINUES WITH, "THE PETTY MAN HATH PRIDE WITHOUT SERENITY." THE KNAVE DID MOCK US WHEN HE SAID THAT!!

WHAT WAS THAT HE DID SAY EARLIER, ABOUT THE MAN OF VIRTUE BEING SERENE BUT NOT PROUD, OR SOME SUCH THING? DID YOU UNDERSTAND IT, SIR SHIGESATO?

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HMPH! "HER HIGHNESS OUR LORD," MY FOOT! SHE IS NOT THE SHOGUN, NOR EVEN A LORD, IN THE FIRST PLACE.
...BRAZEN LITTLE WENCH!
ALL THE OTHER MEN IN THESE CHAMBERS BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE THE CATAMITE OF THE MALE SHOGUN, LORD IEMITSU, SO PRAY COMPORT YOURSELF IN A BEFITTING MANNER.
IN ALL THE INNER CHAMBERS, ONLY THE RESIDENTS OF THE FIRST WING, THAT IS TO SAY, THE THREE GROOMS OF THE BEDCHAMBER THAT YOU JUST DID MEET, AS WELL AS THEIR PERSONAL VALETS AND THE FENCING MASTER, KNOW THAT OUR LORD IS IN FACT A LADY.
...THOSE WHO ARE PRIVY TO THE SECRET MAY NEVERMORE LEAVE THESE CHAMBERS...

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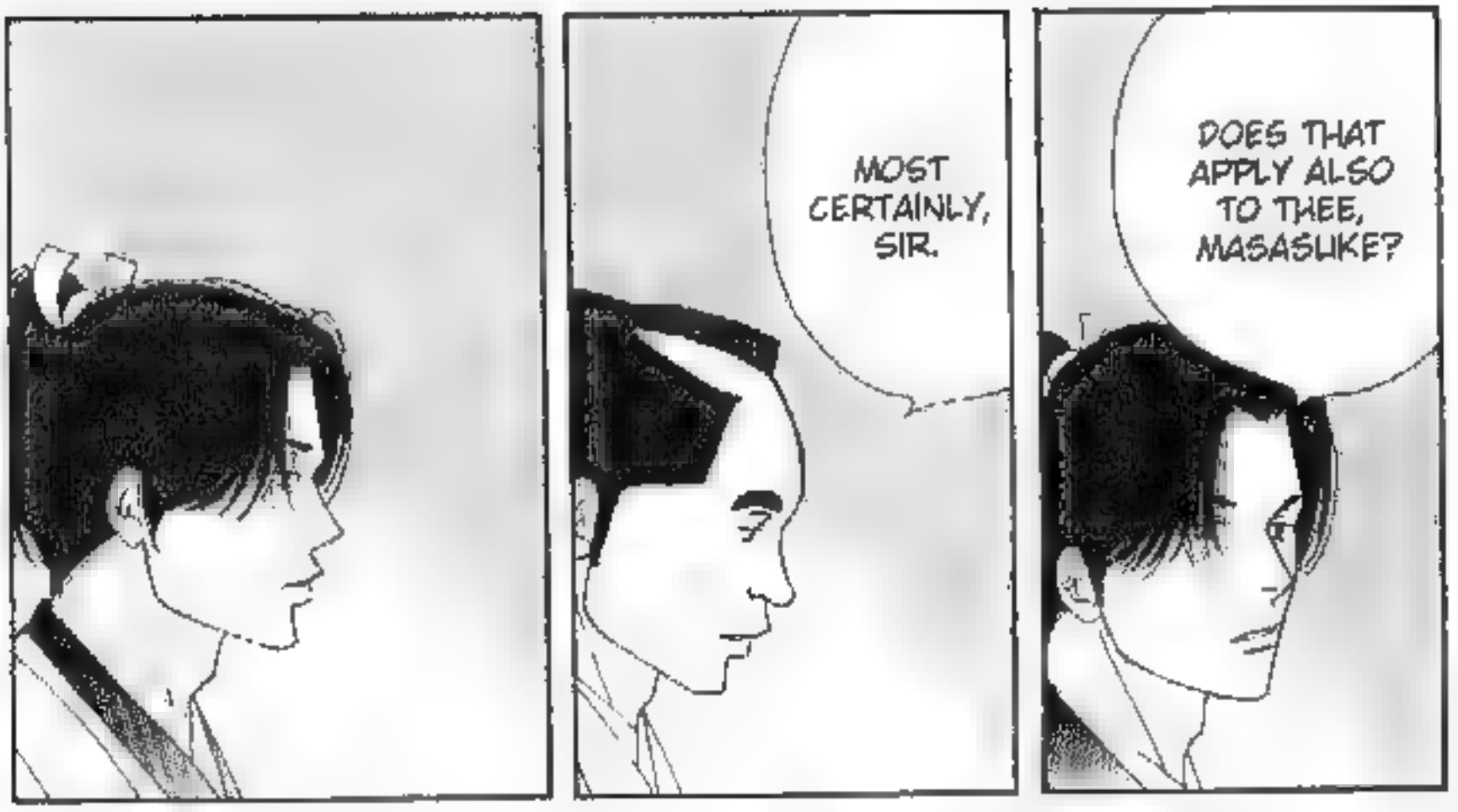

HA HA! 'TIS A SIN TO COMPLAIN WHEN YOU HAVE ENOUGH TO EAT. DINE IN PEACE, GYOKUEI.
I CAN TAKE NO PLEASURE IN THE COOKING OF EDO, NO MATTER HOW LONG WE STAY. 'TIS SO SALTY, AND SO LACKING IN OTHER FLAVORS...

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...

MASTER ARIKOTO?

?

POWOK

KA-KU-NK

...!!

D-DO YOU FEEL ILL, MASTER?!

I HAVE LOST MY APPETITE. PRAY TAKE MY TABLE-TRAY AWAY!

...TAKE IT AWAY.

MEOWW

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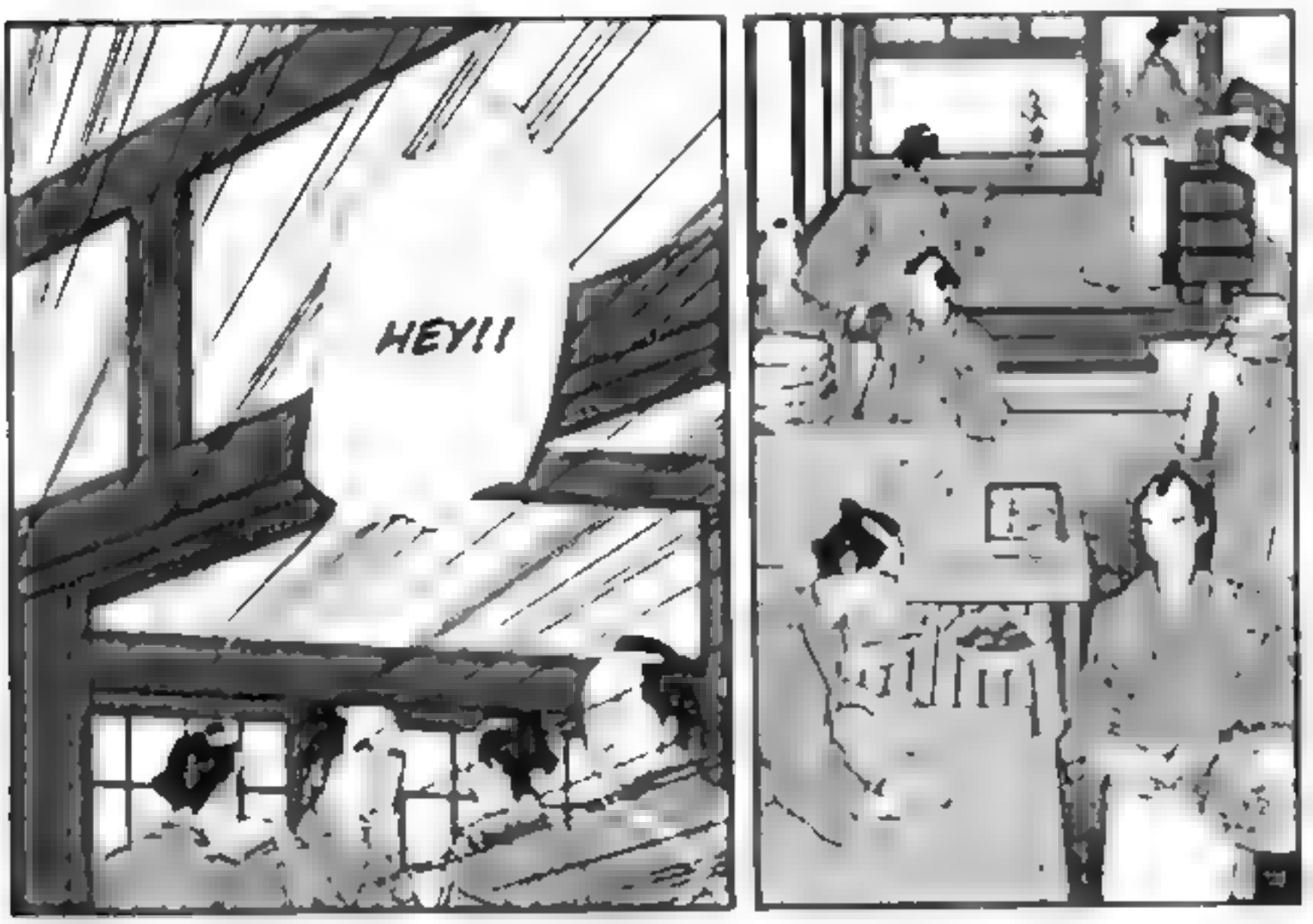

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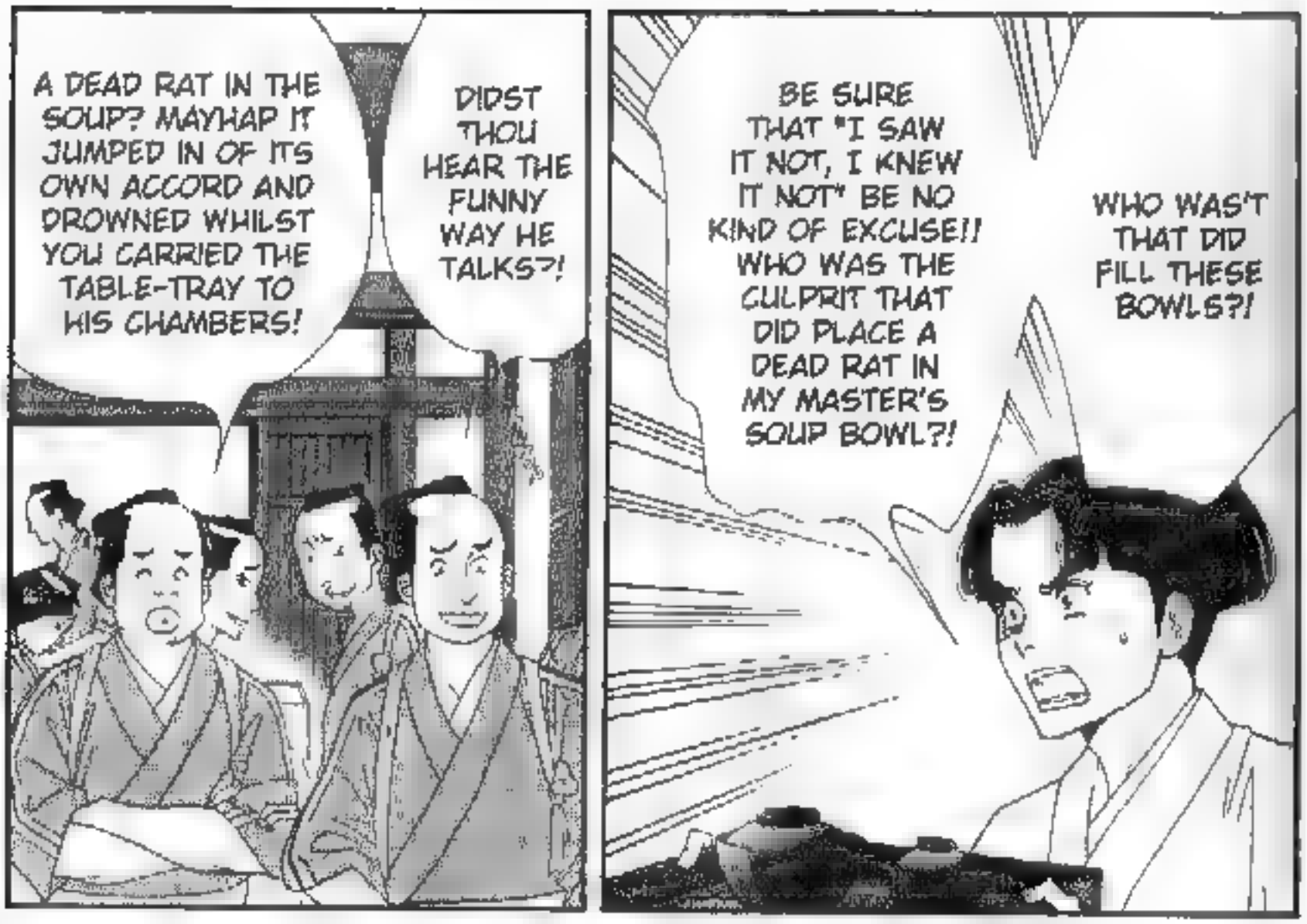
A DEAD RAT IN THE SOUP? MAYHAP IT JUMPED IN OF ITS OWN ACCORD AND DROWNED WHILST YOU CARRIED THE TABLE-TRAY TO HIS CHAMBERS!
DIDST THOU HEAR THE FUNNY WAY HE TALKS?!
BE SURE THAT "I SAW IT NOT, I KNEW IT NOT" BE NO KIND OF EXCUSE!! WHO WAS THE CULPRIT THAT DID PLACE A DEAD RAT IN MY MASTER'S SOUP BOWL?!
WHO WAS'T THAT DID FILL THESE BOWLS?!
THOU.
YE... SCOUNDRELS! YE VILE CURS...!

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AND WHAT IF IT WAS?

'TWAS YOU WHO DID IT!!

GYOKUEI?

HE HATH BEEN GONE TOO LONG.

GYO-KUEI...?

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YOU MUST BE ONE OF OUR LORD'S BEDMATES.

NAY, I KNOW NOTHING OF YOUR VALET. THE INNER CHAMBERS BE A VAST PLACE, WHERE MANY DO LOSE THEIR WAY.

...AND I FEAR HE HATH MISSED HIS WAY...

PRITHEE, SIR. HAVE YOU SEEN A YOUTH AGED 15 YEARS OR SO? MY VALET DOTH NOT RETURN...

I SEE...

...

stare

MAN WHORE!

WELL, IF YOU SHOULD SEE SUCH A LAD, PRAY DIRECT HIM TO THE FIRST WING, WHERE MY CHAMB—

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Shwap
HOW BASE IN COMPARISON THAT THE SON OF AN IMPOVERISHED COURT NOBLE SELL HIS BODY FOR GOLD LIKE A COMMON ACTOR, AND ATTAIN THE RANK OF SHOGUN'S BEDMATE!
...SERVED LORD NOBUNAGA NOT ONLY IN THE BEDCHAMBER, BUT ALSO ON THE BATTLEGROUND.
WE HAVE STRAYED FAR INDEED FROM THE HEROIC DAYS OF CONSTANT BATTLE...
THE BRAVE MORI RANMARU...

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UH...CERTAINLY, 'TIS UNDERSTOOD. I SHALL IMPRESS UPON THEM MOST STERNLY THAT NOTHING OF THE SORT WILL HAPPEN AGAIN.

E'EN SO!! I WISH THEE TO REBUKE MOST HARSHLY THOSE FELLOWS DOWN IN THE KITCHENS. IF THOU BE THE ONE THAT GIVE THEM THE SCOLDING, SURELY THEY SHALL LISTEN!

A RAT...?

But thou didst say, thou alone art enough

THOU BE'ST SIR ARIKOTO'S PERSONAL ATTENDANT, SO HENCEFORTH BE SURE TO TAKE THY MEALS WITH THY MASTER!!

...

SIR ARIKOTO IS COME IN A LITTLE WHILE EARLIER, TO SAY IF THOU RETURNST, TO TELL THEE THAT HE HATH RETIRED TO HIS BEDCHAMBER FOR THE NIGHT.

AARGH! I HAVE BEEN GONE TOO LONG...! WHERE IS SIR ARIKOTO?

SLIP

...

'TIS NOTHING, AND ANYWAY NO CONCERN OF THINE! LOOK AFTER OUR MASTER, BUT LEAVE *ME* BE!!

THOU LOOKEST NOT WELL... AND THY SLEEVE IS RENT AT THE SEAM.

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NGH...!

AWWGH!!

THOSE VILLAINS WERE CAREFUL THEIR TORTURE IS HIDDEN FROM SIGHT.

BRUTES...!!

SIR SHIGESATO, PRITHEE GIVE US A TURN WITH HIM WHEN YOU ARE FINISHED...

BE MY GUEST. COOPED IN THE INNER CHAMBERS, YE CANNOT EVEN LIE WITH WHORES ANYMORE, I WAGER.

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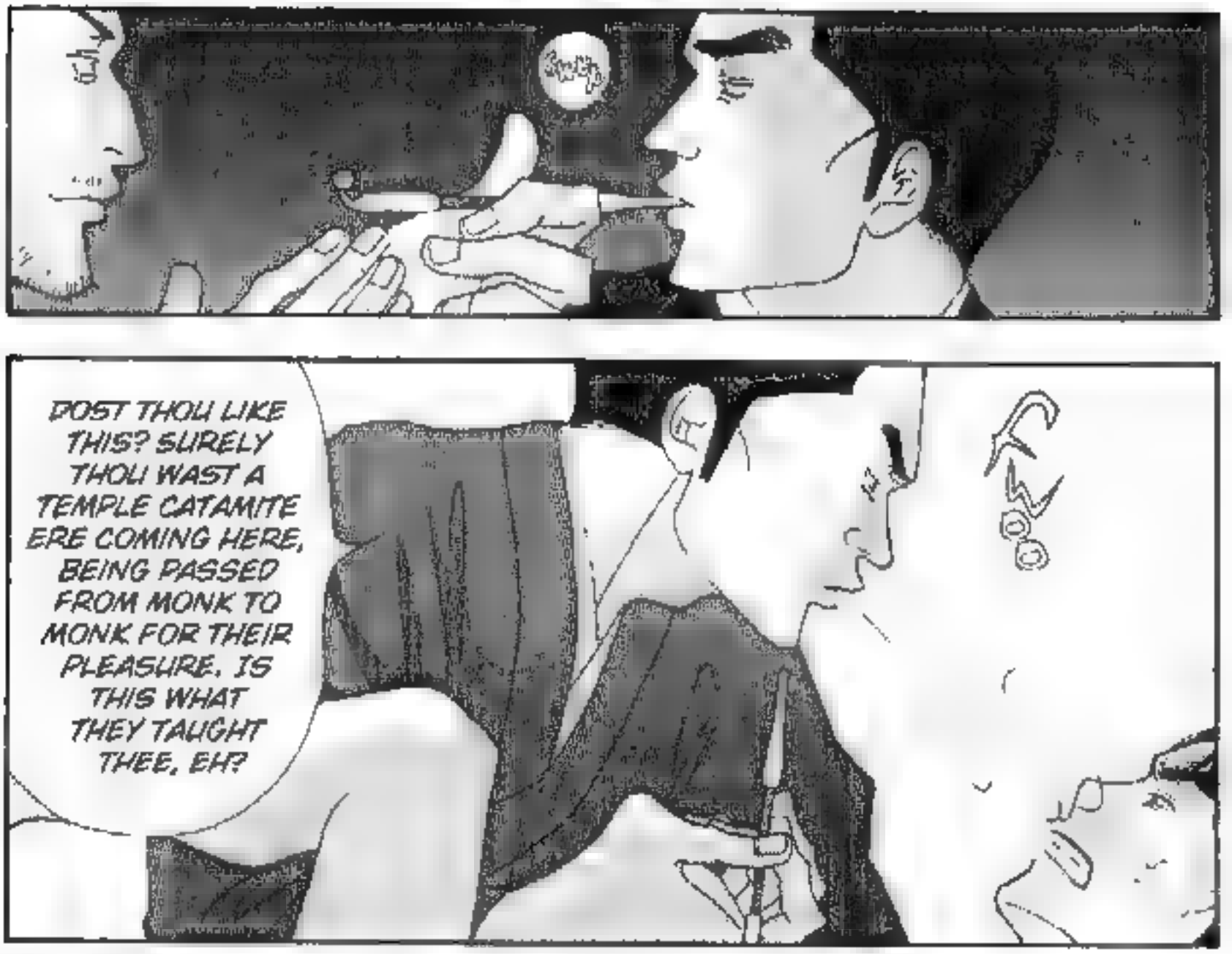
DOST THOU LIKE THIS? SURELY THOU WAST A TEMPLE CATAMITE ERE COMING HERE, BEING PASSED FROM MONK TO MONK FOR THEIR PLEASURE. IS THIS WHAT THEY TAUGHT THEE, EH?
VERILY SO—I AM WELL-ACCUSTOMED TO'T! BUT TO THE TEMPLE PRIORS I WAS MUCH BEHOLDEN, WHILE TO THEE, VILE CUR, NOT AT ALL.
...HEH!
REMEMBER THIS WELL, THAT I SHALL SURELY KILL THEE ONE DAY, THOU CLUMSY OAF!!
Aaah!!
Shwa

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THY MASTER WILL ENJOY THE SAME TREATMENT FROM ME, ERE LONG. I DID SEE HIS NAPE IS WHITE AND SMOOTH LIKE THAT OF A MAID—MUCH MORE TO MY TASTE THAN THEE.

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"GOOD, THEN BE ON YOUR WAY. I SHALL NOT ASK YOU ANY MORE QUESTIONS. THE WHITE CLOUDS ABOVE MOUNT NANSHAN WILL KEEP YOU COMPANY ALWAYS."

WANG WEI'S RESPONSE TO HIS FRIEND'S WORDS MEAN...

WHEN THE GENTLEMAN SAYS HE HATH NOT BEEN CONTENT, HIS MEANING IS THAT THE WORLD OF MEN DOTH NOT AGREE WITH HIM. SO HE WILL RETIRE FROM THE WORLD OF MEN AND LIVE THE LIFE OF A HERMIT AT THE FOOT OF MOUNT NANSHAN.

"NOW GO, AND SPEAK NO MORE TO ME. WHITE CLOUDS WILL DRIFT THERE WITHOUT END."

I DO ENVY THIS GENTLEMAN FRIEND OF WANG WEI'S...

HMM. TO JOURNEY FAR AWAY, ACCOMPANIED ONLY BY THE WHITE CLOUDS ABOVE...

IT APPEARS THAT AT LEAST WE SHALL NEVER WANT FOR BOOKS IN THIS PLACE. 'TIS A BLESSING.

HO, SIR ARIKOTO!

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GET YOU TO THE FENCING HALL, SIR ARIKOTO!! HIE!

whak

WHO ARE YOU TO LAY HANDS UPON MY MASTER?! 'TIS QUITE RUDE!!

BUT I...

HEY!

'TIS THE RULE THAT THE MEN OF THE INNER CHAMBERS MUST PRACTICE THE MARTIAL ARTS, FOR 'TIS OUR DUTY TO PROTECT OUR LORD!

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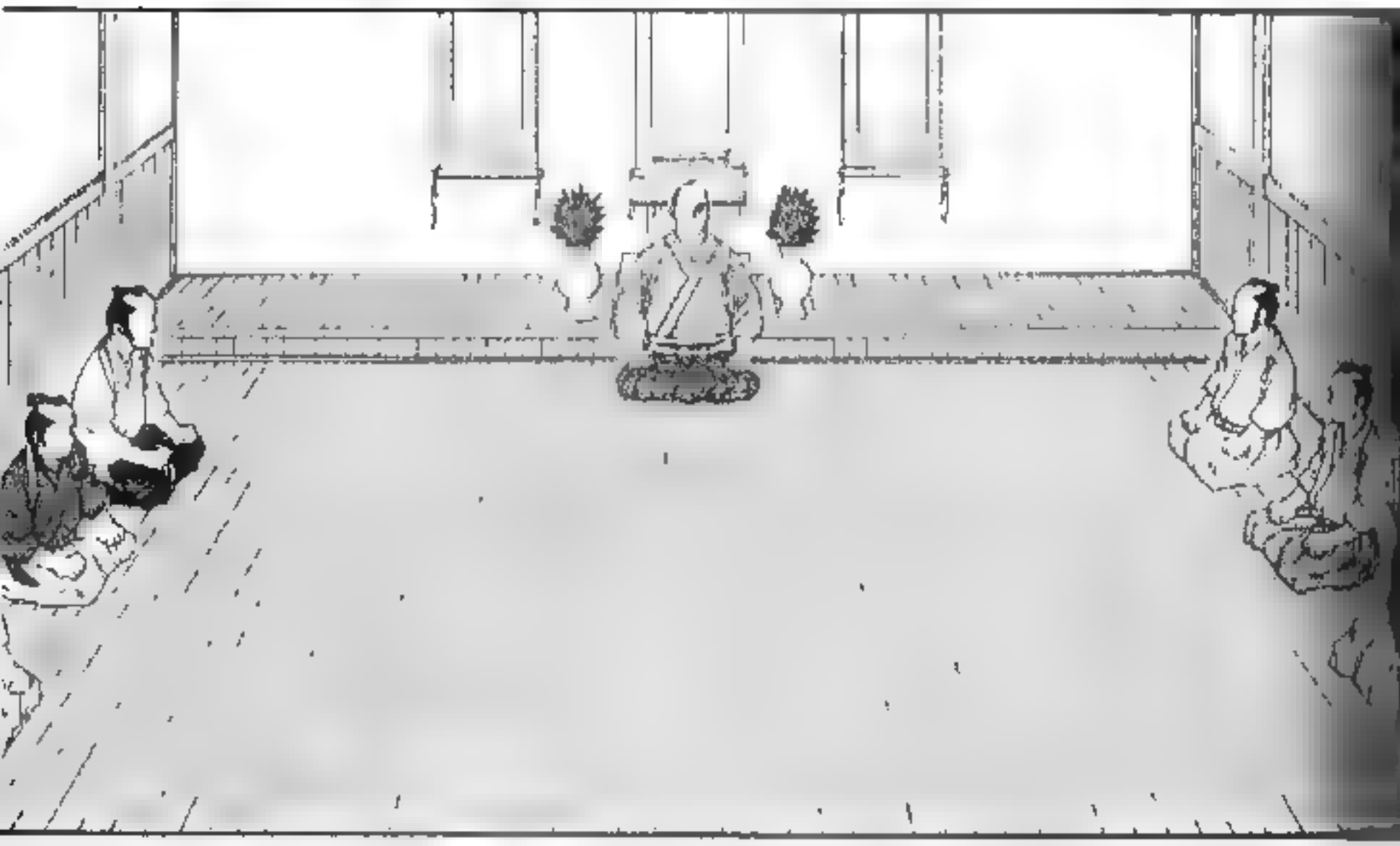
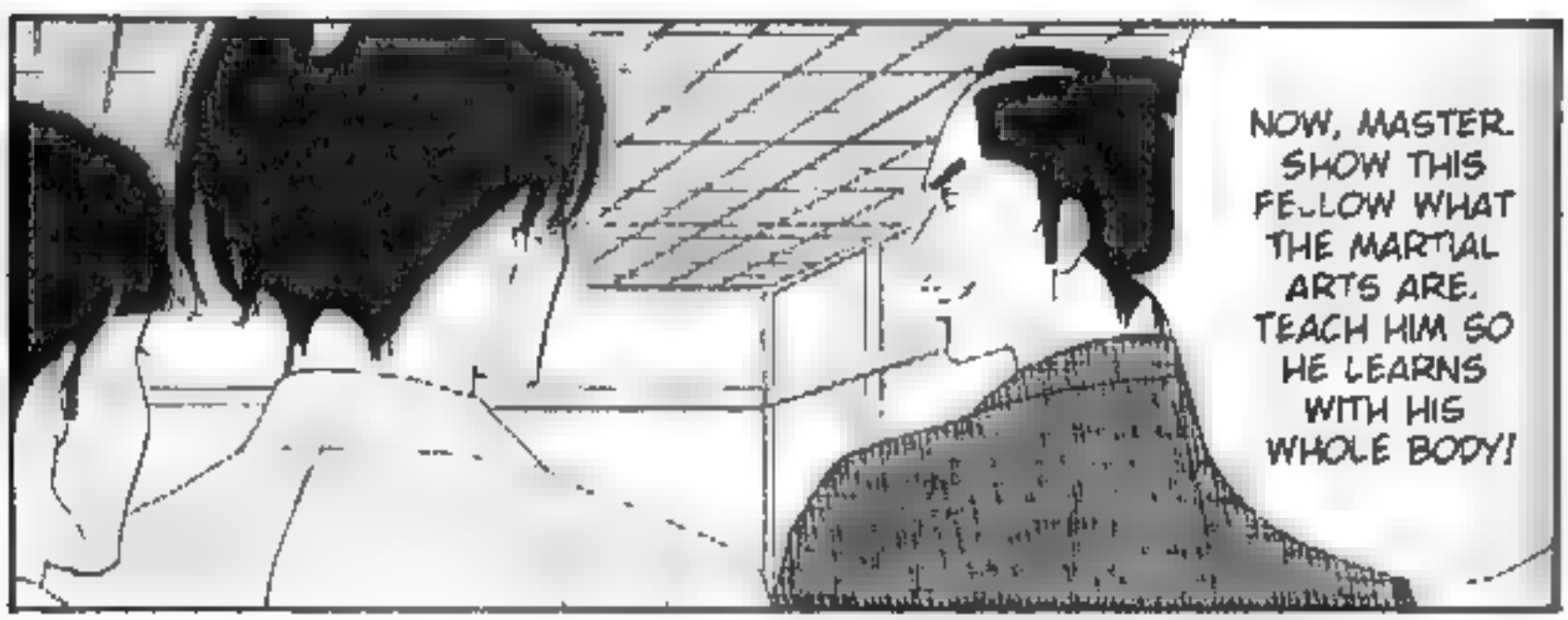
I-I SHALL BE ACCOMPANYING SIR ARIKOTO THITHER!!
IT MATTERS NOT WHAT SORT OF SOFT AND EASY LIFE YOU HAVE LED SO FAR. NOW YOU ARE A DENIZEN OF THE INNER CHAMBERS OF EDO CASTLE, A SAMURAI FORTRESS, AND MUST GET TO BE LIKE US!





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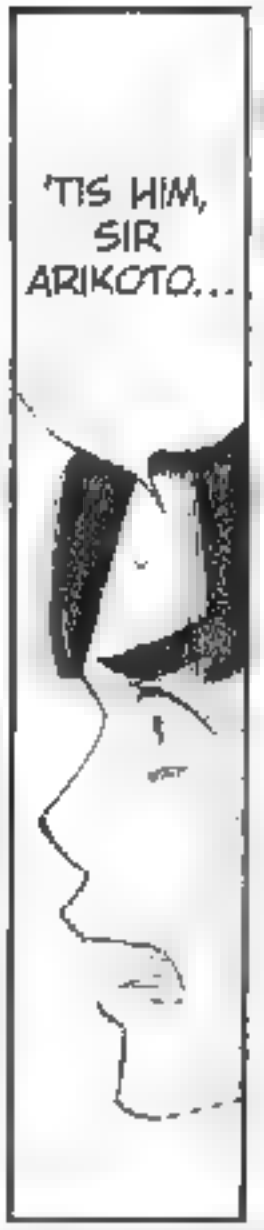

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WHITHER IS HE GONE?!

WITH GREAT RESPECT, MY LORD.

SIR ARIKOTO HATH JUST LEFT FOR THE FENCING HALL IN THE GARDEN OF FUKIAGE, AND WILL BE GONE AWHILE.

SILENCE

...

WHAT'S THAT?! THE FENCING HALL?!

Mewww

AS YOU WELL KNOW, MY LIEGE...

THE REVEREND KASUGA HATH MOST STERNLY COMMANDED THAT YOUR HIGHNESS MAY NEVERMORE VENTURE BEYOND THE FIRST WING OF THESE INNER CHAMBERS.

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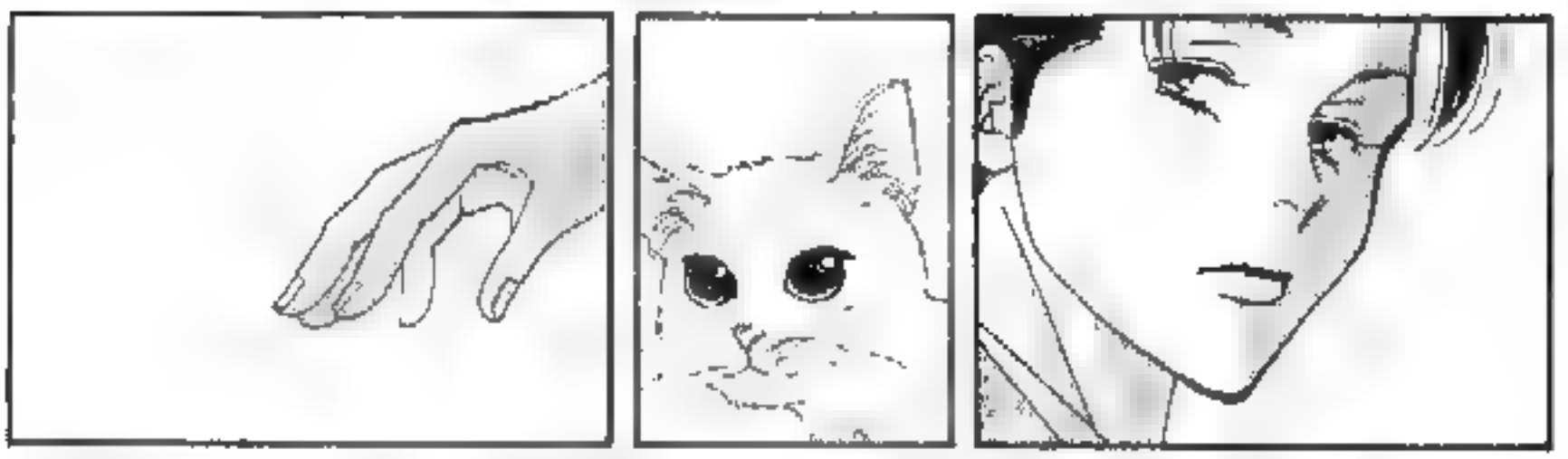

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INDEED, INDEED!! 'TIS CLEAR THE FELLOW KNOWS NOT WHAT TO DO...!

GIVE THE PALE-FACED WEAKLING A GOOD THRASHING, MASTER!

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'TIS VERILY SO THAT I SLEW YOUR ATTENDANT FRIAR. TAKE NOW YOUR REVENGE— STRIKE AT ME!

WHEREFORE DO YOU STAND STILL? MAKE YOU A MOVE.

I MAY NO LONGER BE A MONK, BUT 'TWAS NOT WILLINGLY THAT I RENOUNCED MY VOWS TO SERVE THE LORD BUDDHA. I WISH NOT TO ENGAGE IN VIOLENCE, AND EVEN LESS SO FOR THE SAKE OF REVENGE, WITH A HEART CLOUDED WITH HATE.

I SHALL NOT STRIKE AT YOU.

SHŌ

RAIN BLOWS UPON HIM, SIR SAWAMURA, AND LET US SEE HOW LONG HE RETAINS THIS SAINTLY MIEN!

...

HA HA

HAH, THIS PRETTY CATAMITE DOTH THINK HE COULD STRIKE OUR MASTER, SIR SAWAMURA, IF HE SO WISHED!!

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!

TaDaa!!

Kuh!

THOUGH THIS SWORD BE MADE OF WOOD, HAD I NOT STOPPED IT IN TIME, YOU WOULD MOST SURELY NOW BE DEAD.

I DOUBT IT NOT.

AND YOU WERE SO RESIGNED?

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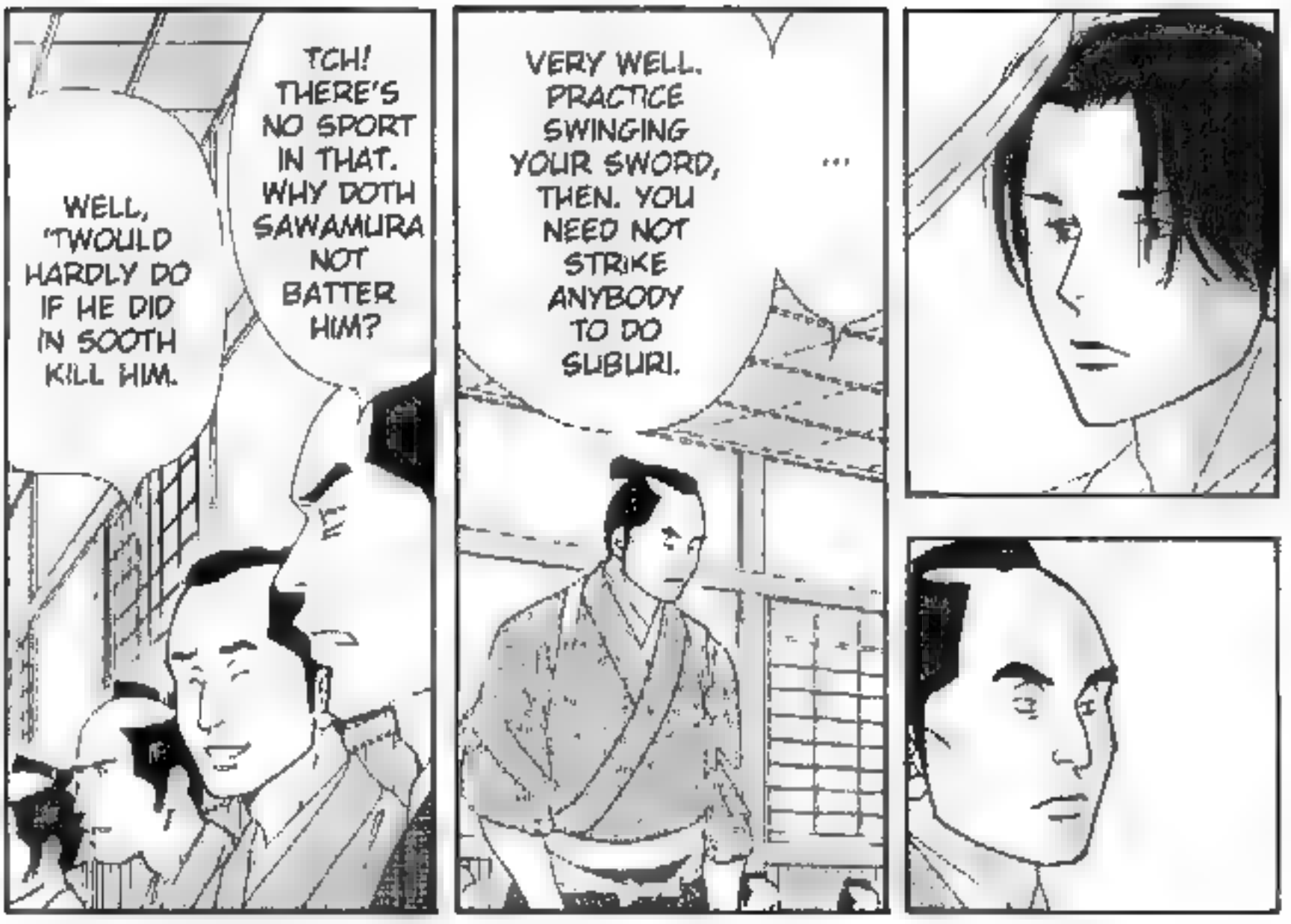
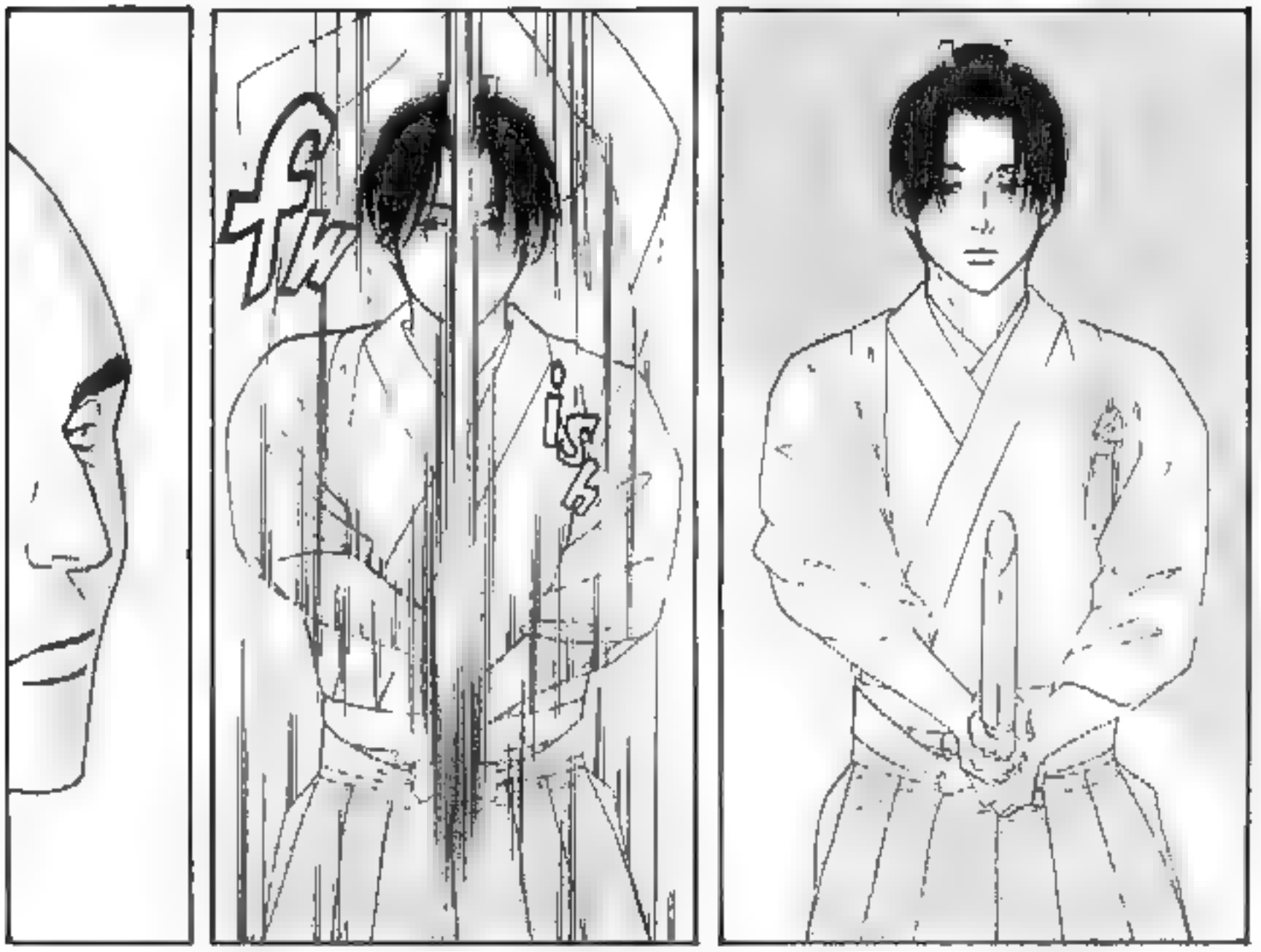

TCH! THERE'S NO SPORT IN THAT. WHY DOTH SAWAMURA NOT BATTER HIM?
WELL, 'TWOULD HARDLY DO IF HE DID IN SOOTH KILL HIM.
VERY WELL. PRACTICE SWINGING YOUR SWORD, THEN. YOU NEED NOT STRIKE ANYBODY TO DO SUBURI.
...



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FIVE...

HMM.

DO FIVE HUNDRED LIKE THAT.

THAT IS WHY I SAID FIVE HUNDRED. ALL THOSE CHARGED WITH THE DEFENSE OF THIS CASTLE DO ONE THOUSAND SUBURI A DAY.

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?! 'TIS FOLLY! MY MASTER HATH NEVER ONCE HELD A SWORD, ERE THIS!

OH HO, NOW MAYBE WE *SHALL* HAVE SOME SPORT!! LET US WATCH THEE TRY TO DO A THOUSAND SUBURI, THOU FEEBLE FOP!!

BUT... SIR ARIKOTO!!

THEN I TOO SHALL DO A THOUSAND.

...

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ONE.

ONE THOUSAND, THEN.

BEGIN!

TWO.

HA HA! SEE HOW HE ALREADY BEGINS TO STUMBLE, THE SOFTLING!

'TIS BUT 71 SO FAR!

SEVENTY-THREE.

SEVENTY-TWO.

To nobody's surprise, by the time he had done fifty, Arikoto was starting to pant heavily.

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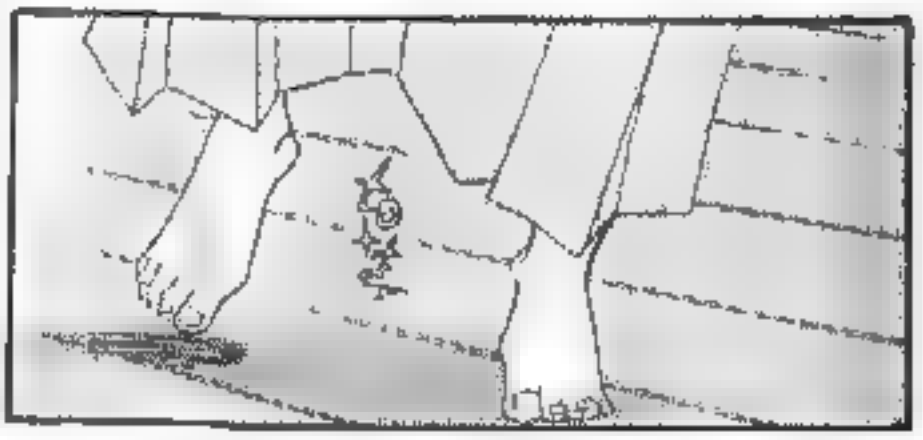
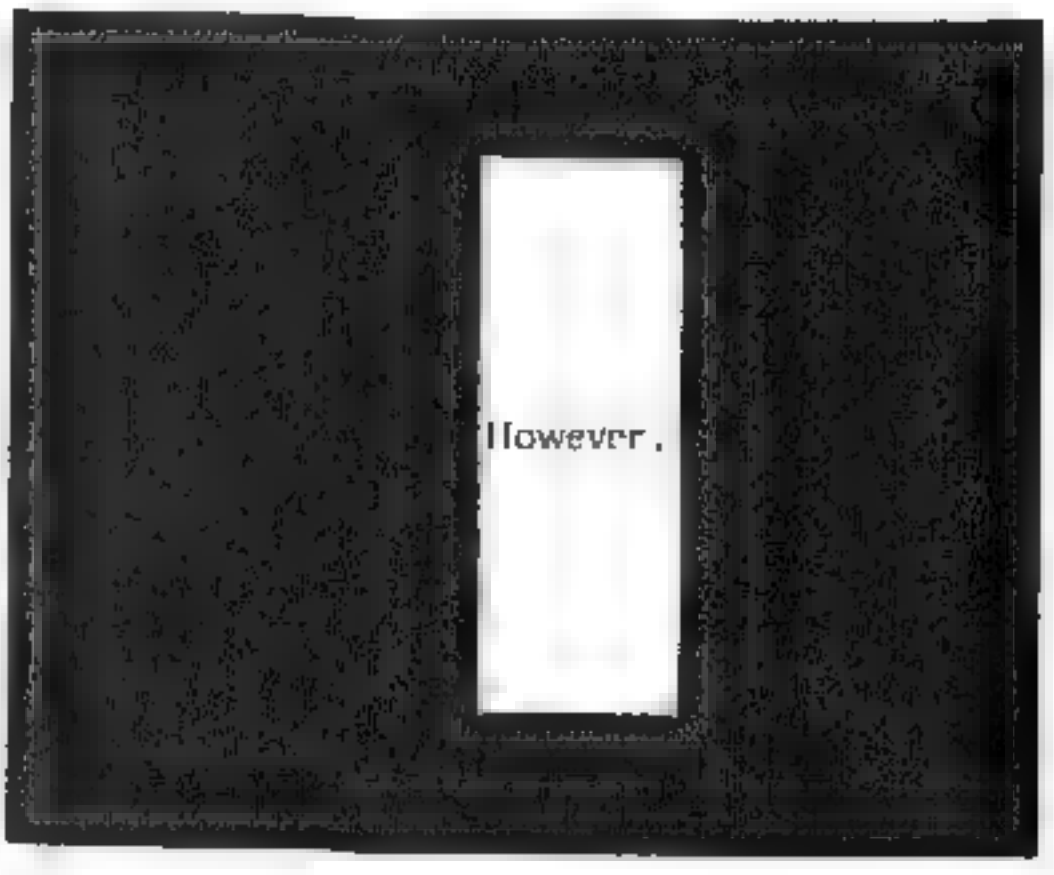
FORSOOTH, 'TIS A DISGRACE! HE WON'T LAST E'EN TO A HUNDRED.
WELL, IF HE COME FROM A FAMILY OF KYOTO NOBLES, I WAGER HE NEVER HELD ANYTHING HEAVIER THAN A PAIR OF CHOPSTICKS ERE COMING HERE.
YOU WAGER? WELL I SAY WE WAGER WHETHER HE REACHES ONE HUNDRED OR NOT! WHO'S IN?!





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SHWUP

302!

HAHH

HAHH

HAHH

HAHH

HAHH

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THE SWORD WAS POINTED ASKANCE WHEN YOU RAISED IT. DO'T AGAIN!

gwp

HOW LONG WILL THIS GO ON .?

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EIGHT HUNDRED!

SIR ARIKOTO!!

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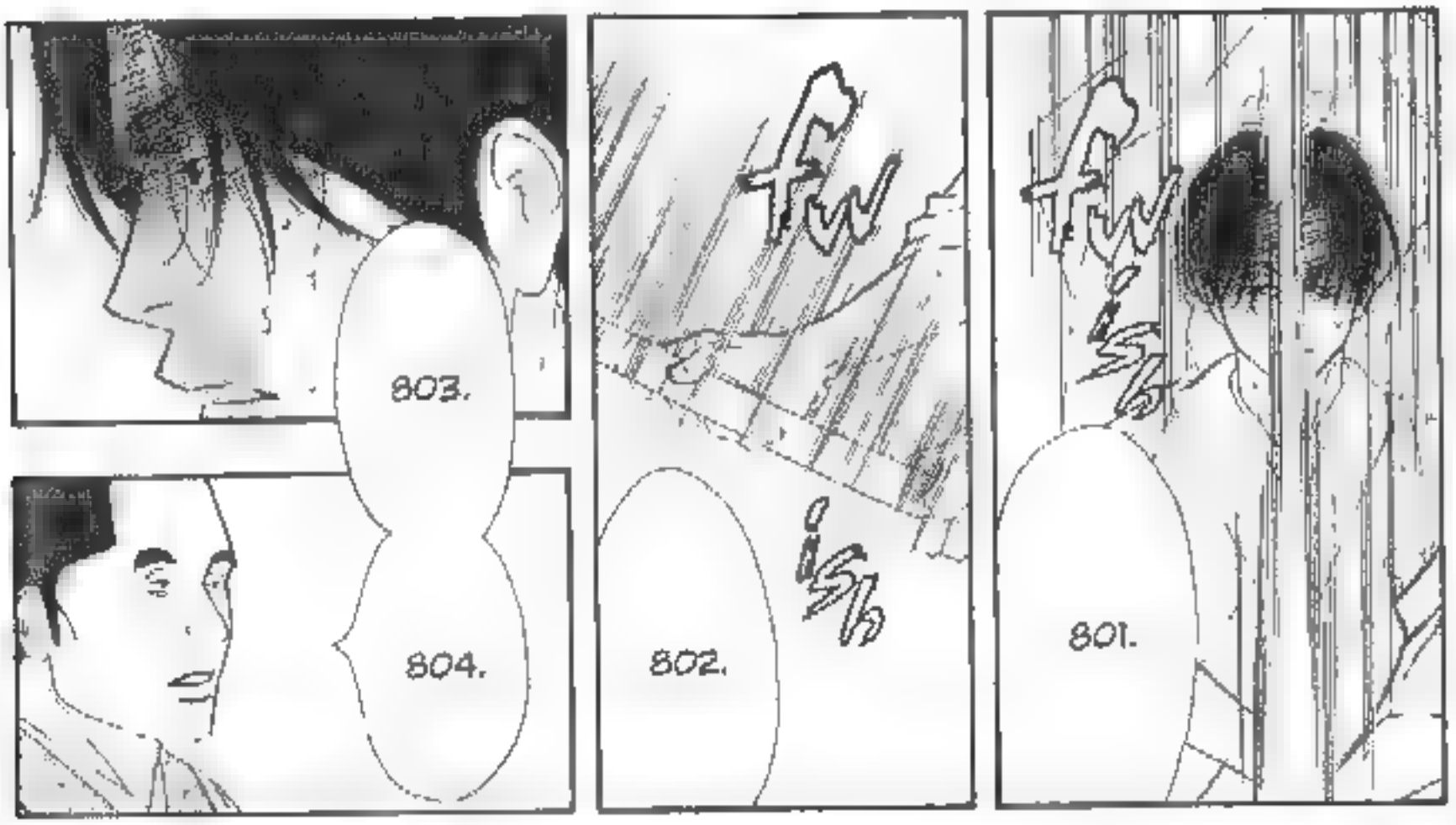

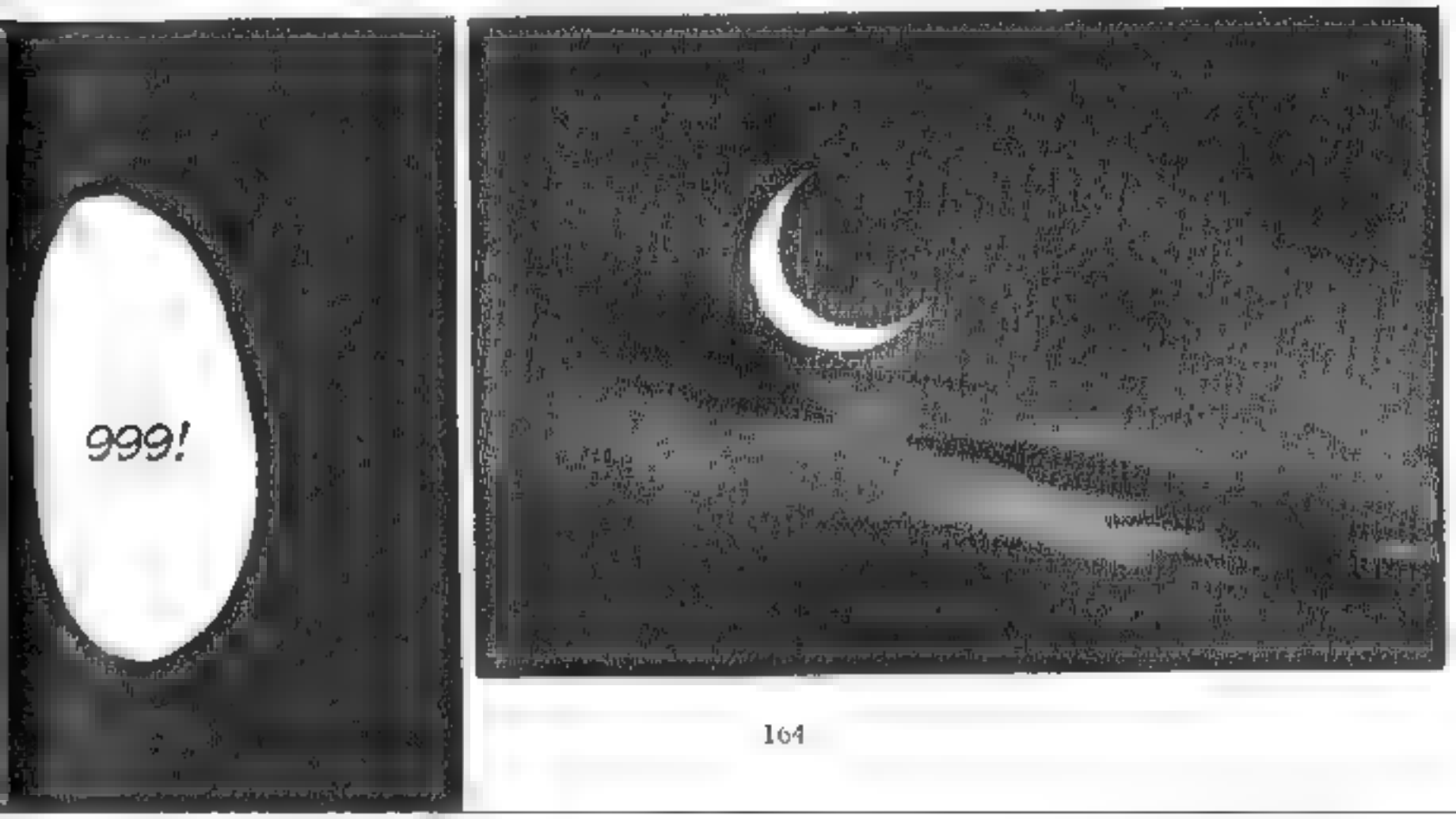

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thwok

ka-tonk

ONE THOUSAND!

MASTER ARIKOTO!!

THAT WILL BE ALL FOR TODAY.

A THOUSAND TIMES, TO BE SURE.

17

OYOKUEL

SORRY FOR THAT... BUT 'TWAS NOT ONLY FROM STUBBORNNESS OR PRIDE THAT I DID PERSIST TO THE END. CANST THOU UNDERSTAND? I SIMPLY...

WHY...? WHEREFORE DID YOU PUSH YOURSELF TO THIS EXTREME?!

I COULD NOT BEAR TO SEE IT, SIR!!

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O-MAN!

SWOP

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OH, THAT IMPUDENT-LOOKING ATTENDANT OF THINE? I SENT HIM AWAY. HE IS IN THINE ANTECHAMBER.

WHERE IS GYOKUEI?

MEOW

AND YET, FOR SOME REASON DEN'EMON HAD ONLY PRAISE FOR THEE. I UNDERSTAND IT NOT.

I HAVE HEARD FROM THE FENCING MASTER, SAWAMURA DEN'EMON, THAT THOU DIDST COLLAPSE IN THE DOJO AFTER DOING SOME SUBURI. 'TIS MOST SHAMEFUL!

. . .YOUR HIGHNESS.

THOU ART A CAT, AND YET THOU HAST RECEIVED A FAR FAIRER NAME THAN I.

HMPH.

...MURASAKI.

I HAVE NAMED HER MURASAKI.

SHE IS QUITE LOVELY, IS SHE NOT?

MM-HM..

...

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I HAVE NO LIKING OF ANYTHING THAT IS SMALL AND WARM LIKE A BABY, FOR IT DOTH REMIND ME OF MY DAUGHTER.

I LIKE HER NOT *BECAUSE* SHE IS LOVELY.

Shp

mew

DOST THOU THINK IT STRANGE THAT I SHOULD HAVE A DAUGHTER? SHE WAS BORN WHEN I WAS 15 YEARS OLD, BUT SHE DID DIE SOON THEREAFTER.

WHAT IS'T?

HMPH. BE THOU DISAPPOINTED THAT I BE NO VIRGIN MAID?

IS THAT SO...

...

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WHAT A THING TO ASK, AFTER WHAT YOU HAVE TOLD ME.

FOR A MOTHER TO LOSE HER CHILD IS ONE OF THE DEEPEST SORROWS EVER TO BE ENDURED IN THIS WORLD.

...YOU HAVE MY MOST PROFOUND SYMPATHY.

After that day, Iemitsu took to visiting Arikoto's chambers with increasing frequency.

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MY DECEASED FATHER, LORD IEMITSU, WAS A SICKLY CHILD AND NEVER HAD MUCH APPETITE.

RICE OF SEVEN COLORS?

HAST THOU HEARD THE STORY OF KASUGA AND HER "RICE OF SEVEN COLORS"?

ONE COOKED WITH GREENS, ONE WITH WHEAT, ONE WITH MILLET, ANOTHER WITH ADZUKI BEANS... THEN THERE WAS TWICE-COOKED RICE, WHICH WAS STEAMED AFTER BEING BOILED, AND DRIED RICE, AND SPLIT RICE, WHERE THE GRAINS WERE POUNDED

SO KASUGA ALWAYS PREPARED SEVEN KINDS OF RICE FOR HIS BREAKFAST.

COME, COME, MASTER TAKECHIYO. WITH SO MANY DISHES TO CHOOSE FROM, SURELY YOU WILL FIND SOMETHING TO SUIT YOUR FANCY.*

*Iemitsu's childhood name

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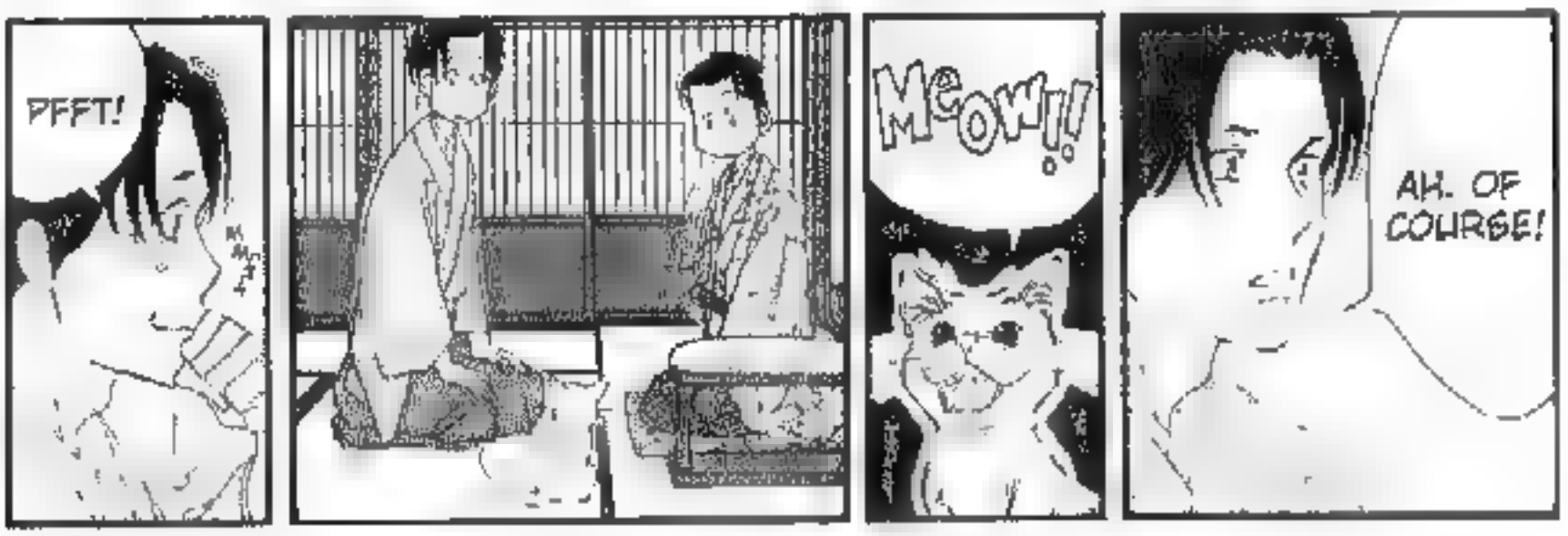
AND NOW THAT HE IS GONE AND I HAVE TAKEN HIS PLACE, 'TIS THE SAME THING... SHE SENT THE LADIES AWAY, AND INSTEAD OF HER "RICE OF SEVEN COLORS," SHE HATH PREPARED FOR ME FOUR DIFFERENT MEN TO CHOOSE FROM.
KASUGA ASSEMBLED A BEVY OF LADIES AND STOCKED THEM IN THE INNER CHAMBERS OF THE CASTLE, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT MY FATHER PREFERRED TO SHARE HIS BED WITH YOUTHS— BECAUSE SHE THOUGHT THAT IF SHE PROVIDED HIM WITH SO MANY DIFFERENT LADIES TO CHOOSE FROM, SURELY HE WOULD FIND AT LEAST ONE THAT SUITED HIS FANCY. THAT IS HOW THIS RIDICULOUS PLACE CALLED THE ŌOKU CAME TO BE.



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HA HA HA HA HA

...ALL HER SCHEMES BOIL DOWN TO JUST ONE—HER "RICE OF SEVEN COLORS"!

SHREWD OPERATOR!

IS'T NOT AMUSING?! SHE DOTH SEEM SUCH A SHREWD OPERATOR, MOST FARSIGHTED AND CUNNING, BUT IN SOOTH...!!

...EVEN AS FORMIDABLE A WOMAN AS KASUGA IS BUT A FOND AND DOTING FOOL AS A MOTHER.

WHEREFORE DID SHE PERCEIVE IT NOT...? GIVE HIM "RICE OF SEVEN COLORS" AS OFT AS SHE MIGHT, MY FATHER DID DIE AS SICKLY IN MATURITY AS HE WAS IN CHILDHOOD, WITH NE'ER ANY LOVE OF WOMANHOOD EVOKED TO THE LAST.

SHE DID ASK ME MY NAME, AND THEN SHE SAID THE FIRST CHARACTER OF GYOKUEI BE READ *TAMA* BY ITSELF, AND CALLED ME O-TAMA!

I WAS JUST CALLED "O-TAMA" BY HER HIGHNESS.

...MAY BE DIFFICULT TO PLEASE, BUT SHE IS CERTAINLY NOT STUPID.

THIS LADY...

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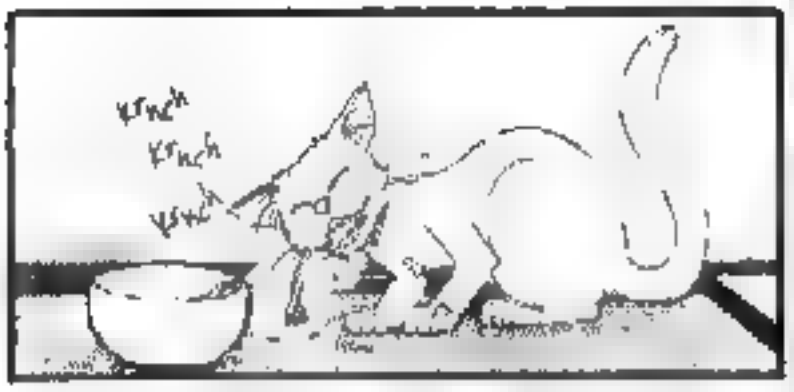

OUR LIEGE HATH QUITE TAKEN TO MURASAKI, HATH SHE NOT? I THOUGHT SHE LIKED HER NOT AT FIRST, BUT HER HIGHNESS SEEMS VERY FOND OF HER NOW.

WHAT? BUT SHE HATH NO GIRLISH NICKNAME FOR YOU, SIR MURASE, BUT DOTH CALL YOU "MASASUKE"! 'TIS HARDLY FAIR!
HA HA! THEN BETTER TO GET ACCUSTOMED TO THE NAME, FOR SHE SHALL USE IT EVERMORE.
NOW, NOW, GYOKUEI, I AM WELL PLEASED TO SEE THEE SO FRIENDLY, BUT PRITHEE TAKE THY MEAL IN SILENCE.

THIS CAT WAS A GIFT FROM OUR LORD THE SHOGUN AND AS SUCH MUST BE CALLED "THE RIGHT HONORABLE CAT." MAKE SURE ALSO THAT SHE BE NOT INJURED, FOR THAT WOULD BE MOST GRIEVOUS.
TUT, GYOKUEI. YOU MUST NOT CALL THE CAT BY HER NAME, 'TIS MOST RUDE.

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I SAY 'TIS SIMPLY A MATTER OF DAYS ERE SHE TAKES HIM INTO HER BEDCHAMBER. WELL, WITH A MAN AS HANDSOME AS HE IS, I DARESAY MOST MAIDS WOULD—

IT SEEMS SHE HATH GIVEN HIM A CAT TO KEEP, AND THE TWO OF THEM PLAY WITH THIS CAT TOGETHER EVERY DAY.

IS'T TRUE WHAT I HEAR, THAT HER HIGHNESS IS SEEN TO ENTER THAT FELLOW'S CHAMBERS QUITE OFT OF LATE?

AND YE CALL YOUR-SELVES MEN?!

thump

I, FOR ONE, SHALL NOT STAND FOR IT!!

IF E'EN THIS HOPE BE EXTINGUISHED, THEN ALL WE HAVE LEFT IS TO SPEND THE REST OF OUR LIVES AS IDLE PRISONERS IN THESE CHAMBERS! IS THAT ALL RIGHT WITH YOU?!

AS BASTARD SONS WITH NO HOPE OF SUCCESSION TO HEAD OF FAMILY WE WERE INVEIGLED INTO THESE INNER CHAMBERS WITH THE PROMISE OF FATHERING THE NEXT SHOGUN!

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...

THIS PLACE IS FAR TOO LARGE!! 'TIS A PROPER JOURNEY SIMPLY TO GO TO THE LATRINE!!

FIE!

NAY, BUT SIR SHIGESATO HATH GOOD REASON TO BE VEXED.

'TIS A JOYLESS PROSPECT...

TO SHRIVEL AND DIE HERE, OUR LIVES QUITE EMPTY AND VOID OF PURPOSE...

BUT WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? I SEE NO WAY, MYSELF.

WELL, 'TIS TRUE WHAT HE SAYETH.

...

MEOW

THERE, THERE, MURASAKI.

SORRY TO SQUEEZE THEE INTO MY BOSOM LIKE THAT, BUT I DID NEED THEE TO BE QUIET.

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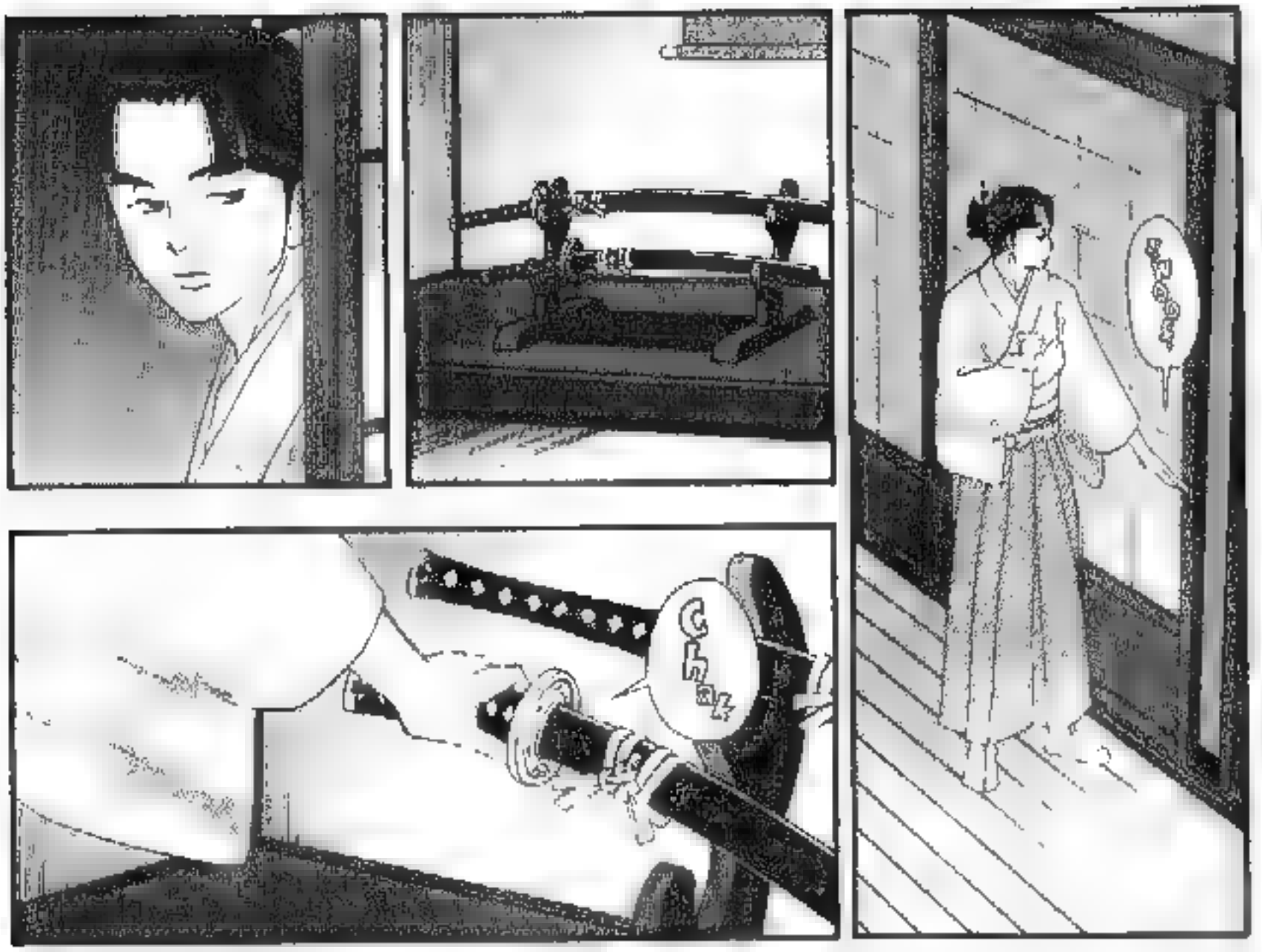

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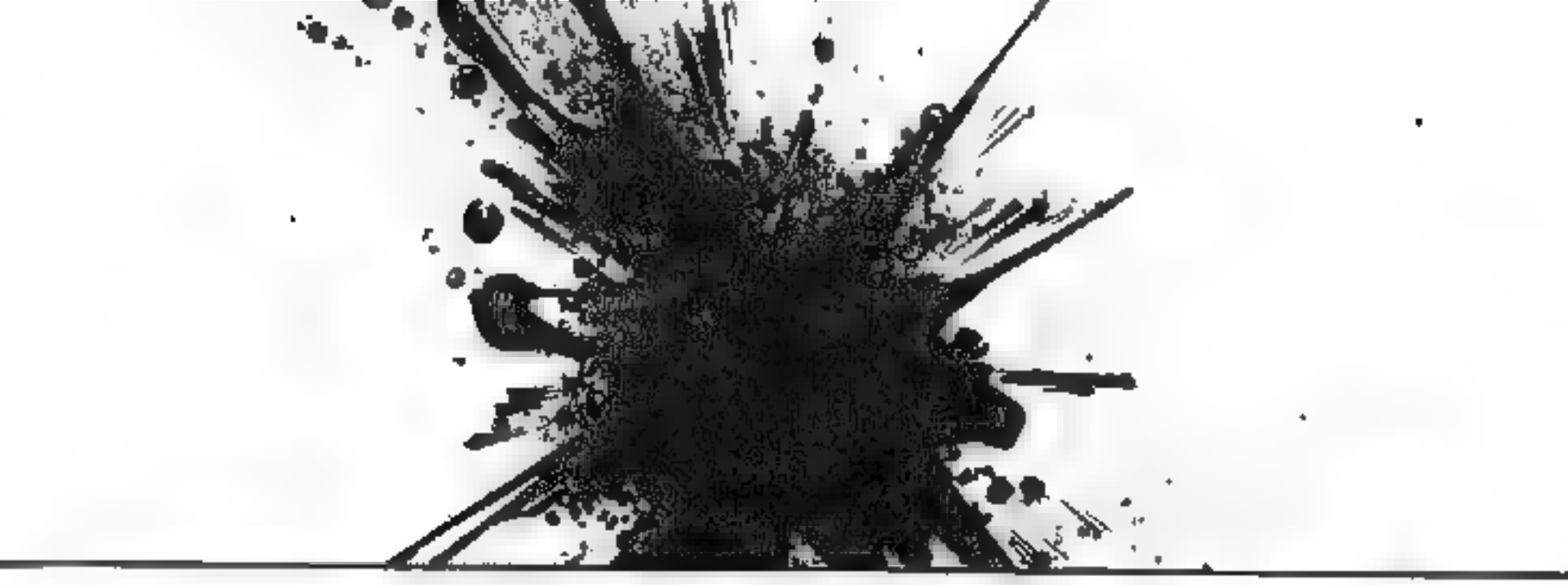

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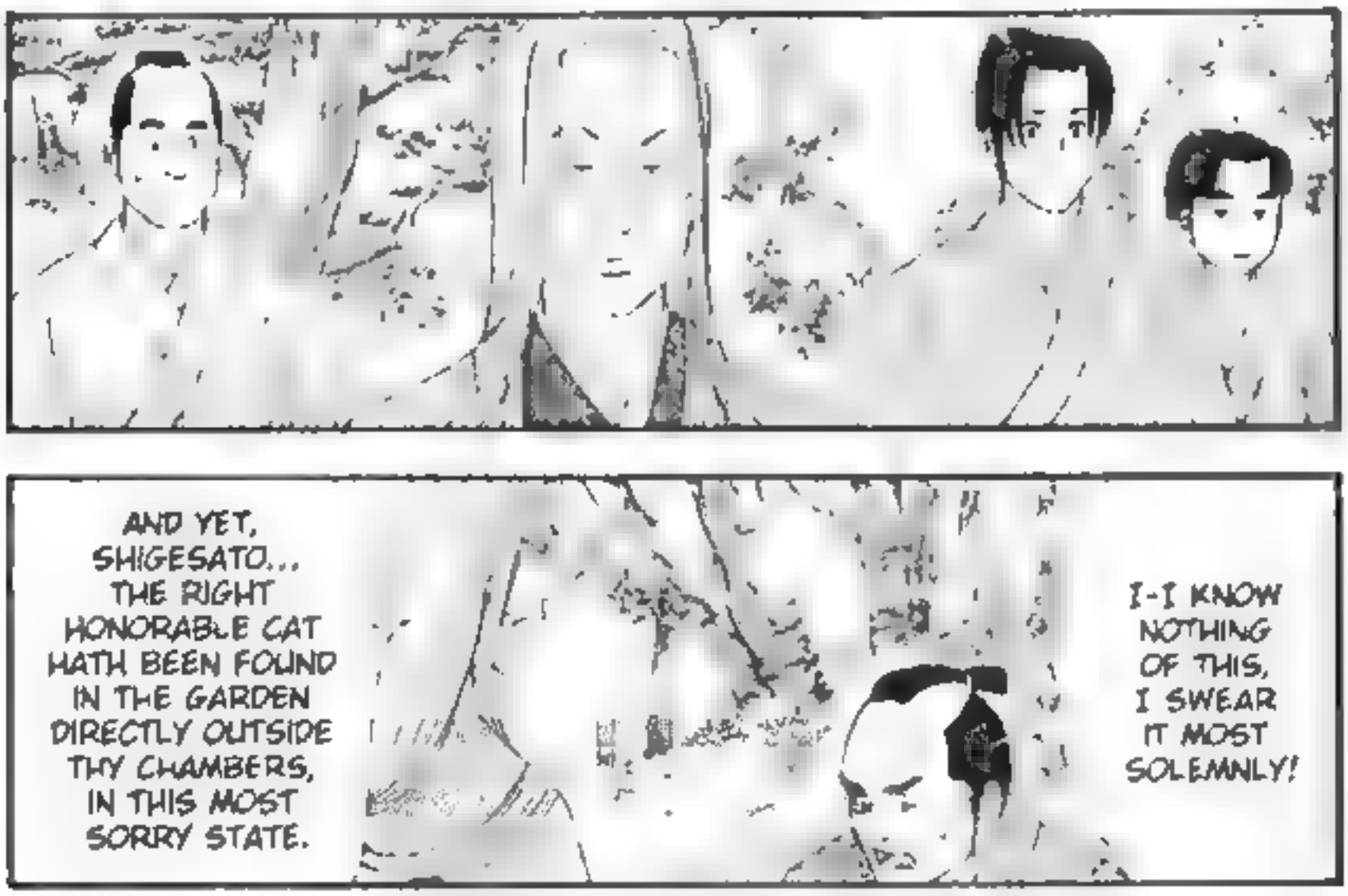
AND YET, SHIGESATO... THE RIGHT HONORABLE CAT HATH BEEN FOUND IN THE GARDEN DIRECTLY OUTSIDE THY CHAMBERS, IN THIS MOST SORRY STATE.
I-I KNOW NOTHING OF THIS, I SWEAR IT MOST SOLEMNLY!

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IT COULD BE...

THE BLADE OF THE SHORT SWORD IS STAINED WITH BLOOD.

BUT WHEN WE LEFT THESE CHAMBERS LAST NIGHT, WE SAW NAUGHT...

I DO SWEAR'T THAT I KNOW NOTHING OF THIS...!

N-NAY, IT COULD NOT BE!! 'TIS SURELY SOME KIND OF MISTAKE!!

MASA-SUKE.

INSPECT SHIGESATO'S SWORDS.

BY MINE OWN HAND SHALL I SLAY THEE!!

P-PLEASE, YOUR HIGHNESS...!!

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I BESEECH YOU, MY LORD, TO DESIST!!

IF I MAY ALSO INTERVENE... TO USE YOUR SWORD ON SUCH A FELLOW WOULD SERVE ONLY TO POLLUTE THE BLADE, PRAY ALLOW ME TO TAKE CARE OF THIS.

YOUR HIGH-NESS.

KASUGA!

GET THEE OUT OF MY WAY!!

ASIDE, O-MAN!!

NAY, MY LORD! I SHALL STAY!

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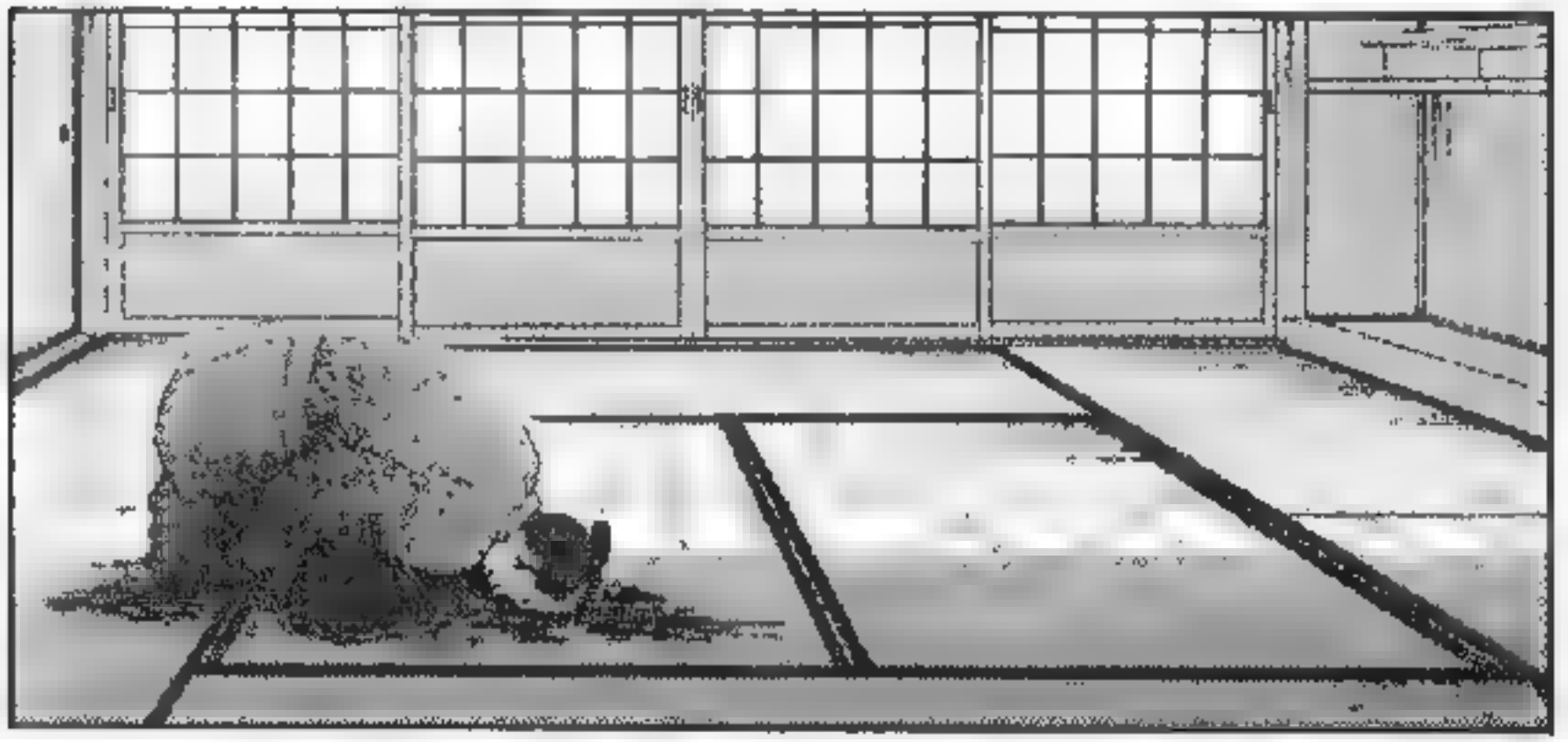
HMPH!

SHIGESATO.

THOU KNOWEST WHAT THOU MUST DO.

...!

NNGH!



Hey!

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'TIS MOST RARE TO HEAR MASTER SAWAMURA SPEAK WORDS OF PRAISE. BUT OF THIS ONE DID HE SAY, THAT MOST UNUSUALLY FOR A COURT NOBLE, HE BE A TRUE MAN OF METTLE.
E'EN SO. OF THE THOUSAND SUBURI
HO, IS THAT THE MAN?
?
BUT MY MASTER DID VERILY DO ONE THOUSAND, NO FEIGNING OR CHEATING!
INDEED!
'TIS WELL-KNOWN THAT THE FENCING MASTER, SIR SAWAMURA, IS TOO DEMANDING—ALL THE MEN SECRETLY DO FAR LESS SUBURI THAN HE COMMANDS, FROM WHAT I HAVE HEARD.
HEY, THEY SAY THY MASTER DID PICK UP A WOODEN SWORD FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS LIFE AND THEN DO ONE THOUSAND PRACTICE SWINGS WITHOUT FALTERING.

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INDEED! AND THANKS TO MY MASTER'S INTERVENTION, SHIGESATO COULD COMMIT HARAKIRI AND DIE WITH HIS SAMURAI HONOR INTACT!

WHAT?! FORSOOTH?!

WELL, THAT TIME, OUR LIEGE DID DESIRE TO SLAY SHIGESATO ON THE SPOT, BUT SIR ARIKOTO THREW HIMSELF IN BETWEEN THEM, FULLY PREPARED TO TAKE THE SWORD HIMSELF, AND DID CONVINCE OUR LORD TO DESIST!

AND, T'OTHER DAY, WHEN THE RIGHT HONORABLE CAT THAT OUR LIEGE DID GIVE MY MASTER WAS FOUND DEAD...YE KNOW THAT SUNAMI SHIGESATO HAD TO DISEMBOWEL HIMSELF FOR THE CRIME...

WELL, 'TWAS MOST BRAVE OF THY MASTER TO DO THAT...! 'TIS SAID THAT OUR LIEGE HATH A MOST VIOLENT TEMPER. SIR ARIKOTO IS INDEED MOST ADMIRABLE!

SO THEN, I DID HEAR ALL MANNER OF STORIES AND RUMORS FROM THE FELLOWS WHO WORK IN THE KITCHENS.

ONE OF THEM, WHICH WAS MOST CURIOUS, WAS ABOUT THE FENCING MASTER, SIR SAWAMURA.

The newcomer's standing had begun very slightly to improve

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I KNOW NOT WHETHER THE STORY BE TRUE OR NOT, BUT THE VERY FACT THAT SUCH TALES BE TOLD ABOUT THE MAN SHOWS THAT PEOPLE HERE FIND HIM QUITE SINISTER.

AS FOR MYSELF, HE IS A MOST BITTER ENEMY, FOR I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN THAT HE DID SLAY FRIAR MYOKEI

'PON MY HONOR, THESE INNER CHAMBERS DO RESEMBLE THE MONASTERY IN MANY WAYS. DO YOU REMEMBER HOW THE FRIARS ALL ENJOYED GHOST STORIES AND OTHER EERIE TALES?

SO, THIS RUMOR I HAVE HEARD GOES LIKE THIS—EVERY NIGHT, SIR SAWAMURA DOTH TAKE A SMALL NUMBER OF GUARDS AND LEAVE THE CASTLE... AND UPON HIS RETURN, THEY SAY...

...HE CLUTCHES LONG TRESSES OF HUMAN HAIR

'TIS A SWORD-BEARING MAN OF THE WARRIOR CLASS, WHO STRIDES THE STREETS AT NIGHT AND HACKS OFF THE HAIR OF PASSING MAIDENS, AS IF TESTING THE SHARPNESS OF HIS BLADE.

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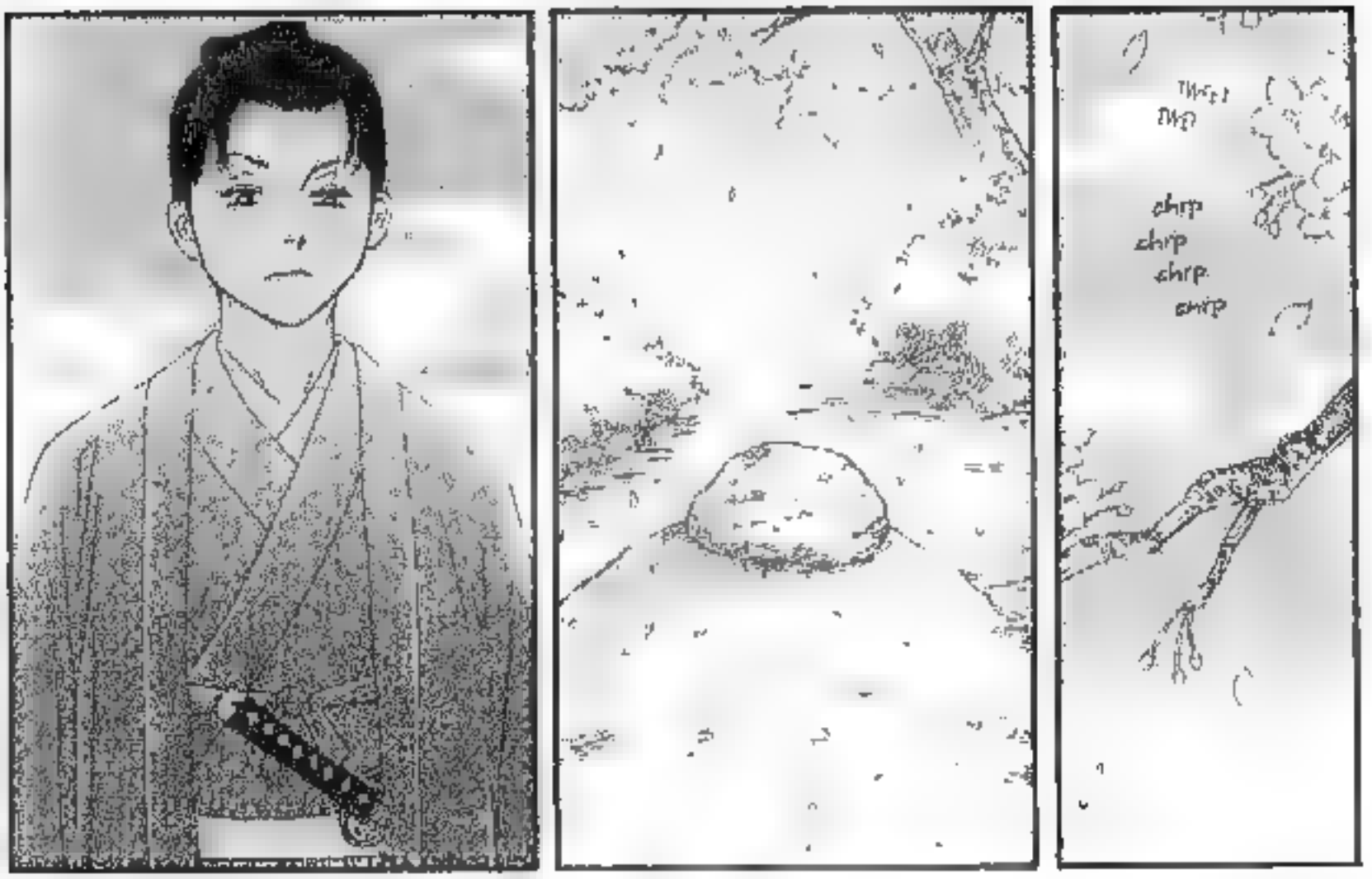

CHANTING PRAYERS WILL NOT BRING THE CAT BACK TO LIFE. SO WHEREFORE DO IT?
NAY, NOT I.
LET US OFFER SOME PRAYERS SO THAT HER SOUL MAY REST IN PEACE, YOUR HIGHNESS.
'TIS THE GRAVE OF MURASAKI.
...WHAT IS IT?

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...THEN SLOWLY, LITTLE BY LITTLE, ONE IS ABLE TO ACCEPT THE SORROWFUL LOSS, AND THE GRIEF BEGINS TO EBB...

CHANTING PRAYERS DOTH HELP TO CALM THE SPIRIT, AT LEAST WHILE THE PRAYER DOTH LAST. IF EVERY TIME ONE REMEMBERS THE DEPARTED, ONE CHANTS A PRAYER..

...FINE WORDS!!

I DO BELIEVE THAT FUNERAL RITES ARE HELD FOR THE SAKE OF THOSE WHO ARE LEFT BEHIND, THAT THEY MAY COME TO TERMS WITH THEIR GRIEF.

MY LORD.

BUT WHAT SHOULD THE WRETCHED DO, WHO CAN CHANT PRAYERS ALL THE DAY AND NIGHT AND YET BEFORE THEIR GRIEF CAN BEGIN TO EBB, ARE BESET WITH WAVE AFTER WAVE OF NEW GRIEFS, NEW HARDSHIPS, NEW MISERIES?!

CHANTING PRAYERS CAN ONLY HELP THOSE WHO WERE HAPPY BEFORE THEIR LOSS!!

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BUT SLAYING SHIGESATO WOULD NOT HAVE BROUGHT MURASAKI BACK TO LIFE, EITHER.
AND WHAT ABOUT THE EVILS IN THIS WORLD FOR WHICH NOBODY IS TO BLAME? AND THE TIMES WHEN THERE IS A FOE, BUT HE CANNOT BE TOUCHED? WHAT DO YOU DO THEN?!
RATHER THAN CHANT PRAYERS, AND WEEP AND SOB MAWKISHLY, I WOULD SOONER KILL MY FOE AND BE DONE WITH'T! 'TIS A FAR BETTER WAY TO CALM THE SPIRIT THAN THINE!
...THOU DIDST STOP ME THAT TIME, BUT HAD I SLAIN SHIGESATO, THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE END OF'T!
'TIS SIMPLE. I SLAY ANOTHER, FROM AMONG THOSE WHO HAPPEN TO BE NEARBY.
VAGRANTS LIVING ON THE STREET, WHO HAVE NONE TO GRIEVE FOR THEM ANYWAY, OR CRIMINALS... THERE ARE COUNTLESS SUCH FOLK, AFTER ALL, WHOSE LIVES ARE WORTH NOTHING.

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SO?

AND I DID HEAR THAT THIS WAS THE WORK OF A SAMURAI WHO LATELY STALKS THE STREETS OF EDO AND PREYS UPON THE LOCKS OF MAIDENS.

AAARGH!!

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AYE, THOU DIDST GUESS RIGHT, THAT SAWAMURA DEN'EMON WENT FORTH AT MY COMMAND AND DID LOP THESE LOCKS OFF THE HEADS OF WENCHES!

ART THOU SATISFIED?!

HAIR DOTH GROW AGAIN SURELY THEY WILL SOON HAVE THEIR LONG TRESSES BACK!

AND WHAT OF'T? I UNDERSTAND THEE NOT, COMING AT ME WITH THY FACE QUITE CHANGED, AS IF I WERE A DEVIL... 'TWAS A BIT OF MISCHIEF! THE MAIDS HAD THEIR HAIR SHORN— THEY WERE NOT CUT DOWN AND SLAIN.

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SHOULD THEY THEN CUT OFF THE LOCKS OF OTHER MAIDS?! WHERE WOULD IT END?! 'TIS A WICKED, FOOLISH THING YOU HAVE DONE, AND TO YOUR OWN SUBJECTS, MY LORD—TO THE FOLK OF YOUR OWN REALM!

PERHAPS YOU FELT A BIT BETTER AFTERWARDS, YOUR HIGHNESS, BUT WHAT OF THE MAIDENS WHOSE HAIR WAS SO BRUTALLY STOLEN FROM THEM? WHAT SHOULD *THEY* DO TO VENT THEIR SHAME, ANGER AND HUMILIATION?!

WHAT DIDST THOU SAY?!

'TWAS A WICKED, FOOLISH DEED!!

EVEN KASUGA DOTH CODDLE AND COSSET ME FOR ONE REASON ALONE—SHE SEES IN ME THE SHADOW OF MY FATHER!!

MY OWN SUBJECTS?! MY OWN REALM?!

HAH!! THOU BLOCKHEAD!! WHO HERE THAT CALLS ME "LORD" DOTH VERILY THINK OF ME THUS?! ALL I AM, IN THEIR MINDS AND IN SOOTH, IS BUT A TEMPORARY VESSEL—A WOMB TO PRESERVE THE TOKUGAWA BLOODLINE!!

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BUT SHE, INSTEAD OF RAILING AGAINST HER SAD LOT, DID MOST ADMIRABLY KNEEL DOWN BESIDE ME AND CHANT PRAYERS FOR HER DEAD BROTHER.

...THE MAIDEN THAT I DID ENCOUNTER, IN ADDITION TO THE INDIGNITY OF HAVING HER TRESSES CUT OFF, HAD JUST LOST HER BROTHER TO THE REDFACE POX.

'TIS...!! 'TIS NOT BY MY MINE OWN CHOICE THAT I SPEND MY DAYS HIDING INSIDE THESE INNER CHAMBERS, GARBED LIKE A MAN AND LIVING LIKE A PRISONER, OR INDEED A PHANTOM!!

PEOPLE EVERYWHERE, IN ALL WALKS OF LIFE, ACCEPT THE FATE THEY ARE POWERLESS TO CHANGE AND LIVE WITH IT!

IF YOU THINK THAT YOU ALONE IN THIS WORLD SUFFER HARDSHIP AND PAIN, YOU ARE MOST GROSSLY MISTAKEN!!

I AM NO DIFFERENT! I WAS BROUGHT HERE TO THIS UNHAPPY PLACE FOR YOU AGAINST MY WILL!!

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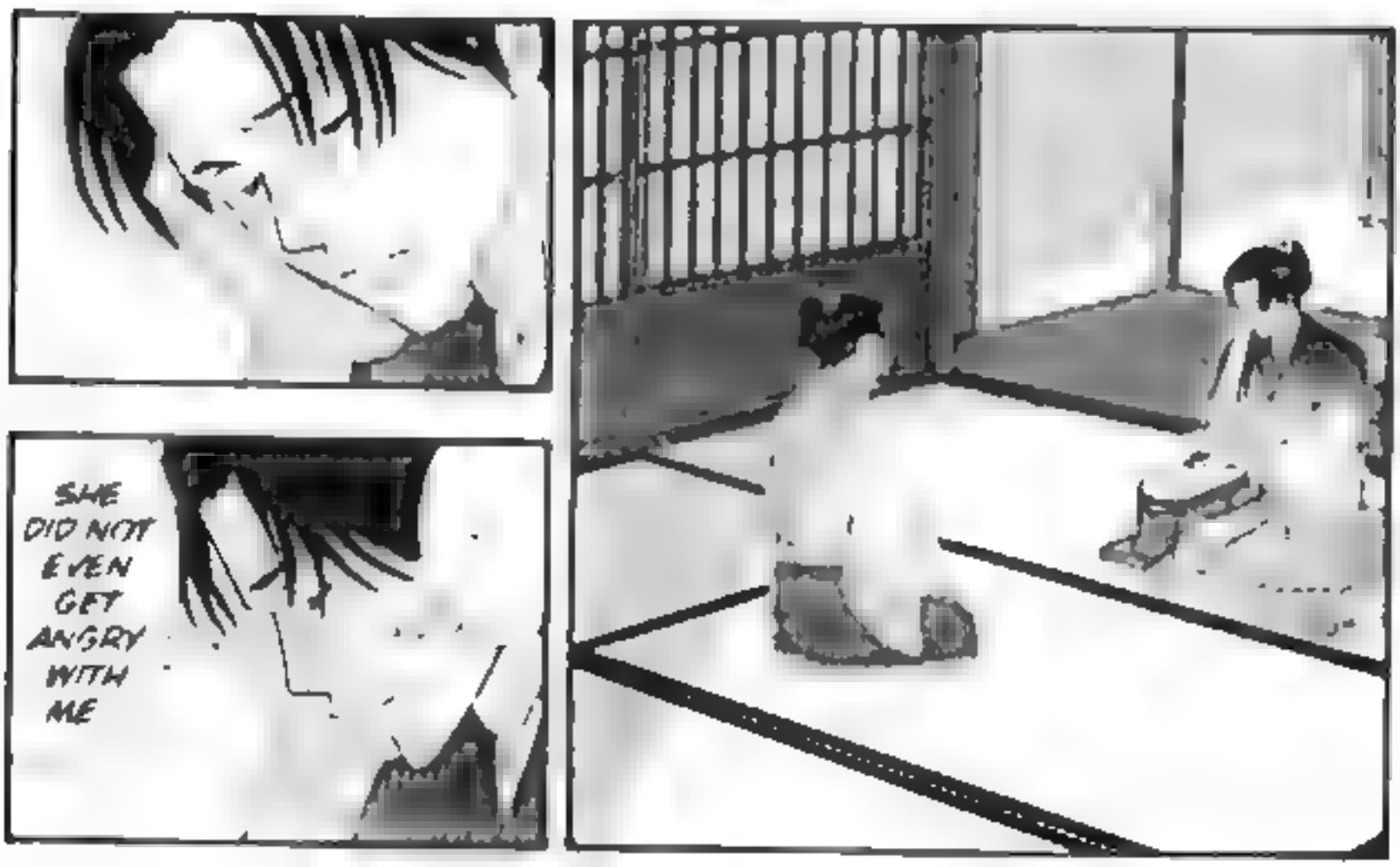

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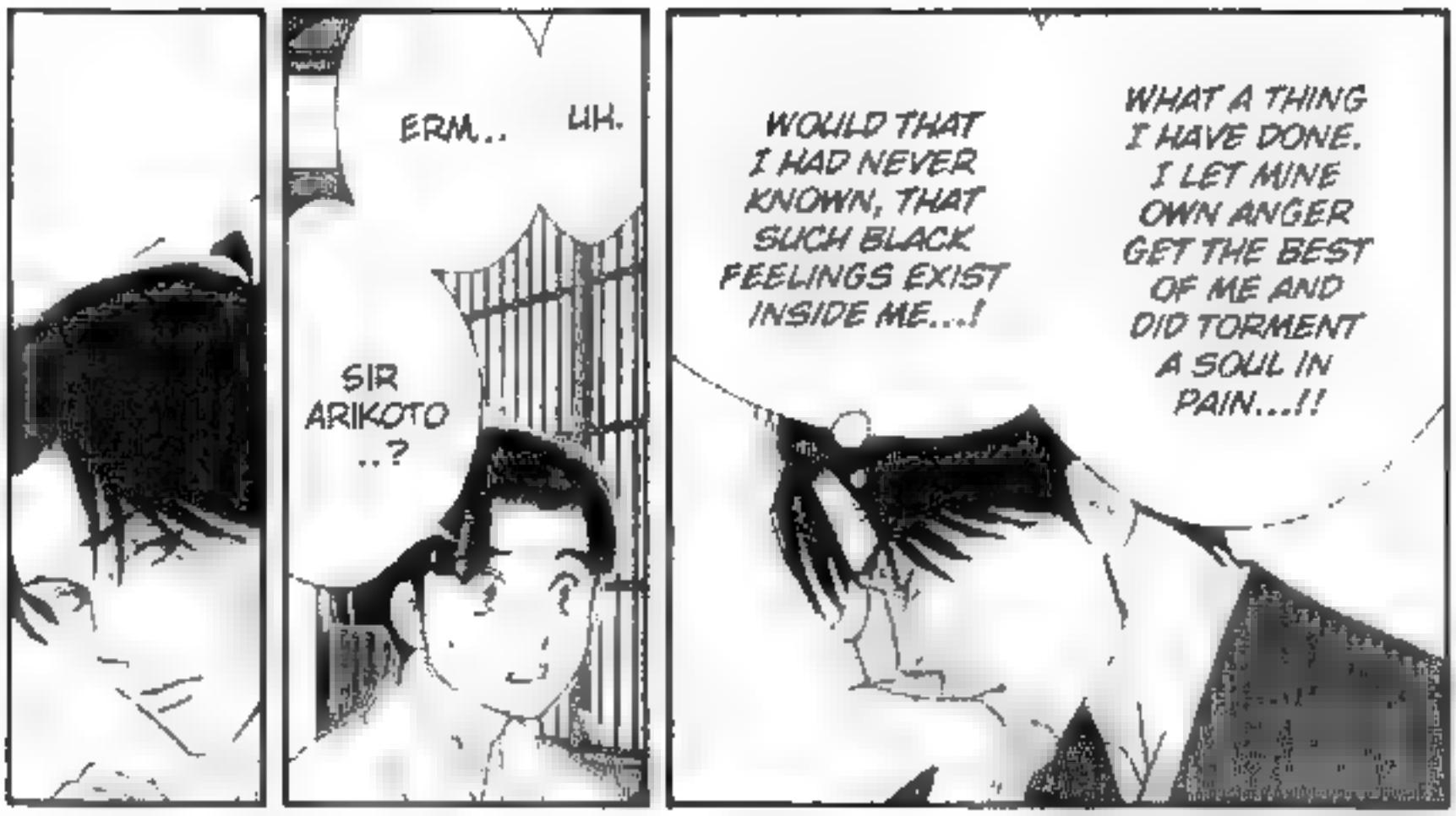
ERM..
UH.
SIR ARIKOTO ..?
WOULD THAT I HAD NEVER KNOWN, THAT SUCH BLACK FEELINGS EXIST INSIDE ME...!
WHAT A THING I HAVE DONE. I LET MINE OWN ANGER GET THE BEST OF ME AND DID TORMENT A SOUL IN PAIN...!!

THE DEATH OF MURASAKI WAS THY DOING, WAS IT NOT? SIR SUNAMI DID VERILY KNOW NOTHING OF IT... AM I MISTAKEN?
GYOKUEI.
!
SIR ARIKOTO...
'TIS A MOST SAVAGE, BRUTISH PLACE...
O GYOKUEI, WHAT THOU MUST HAVE ENDURED BECAUSE OF ME... I AM TRULY SORRY.
'TIS SO, THEN...

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I HAVE KILLED ALSO.

WHY DO YOU NOT REBUKE ME FOR WHAT I HAVE DONE?! FOR I HAVE, INDEED, DONE IT! I DID, WITH MY OWN HANDS, KILL MURA—

THAT IS WHY I REBUKE THEE NOT, GYOKUEI, AND WHY THOU HAST NO CAUSE TO BLAME THYSELF ..

AND HE WAS NOT E'EN MY FIRST VICTIM.. FOR MYOKEI, AND THAT COURTESAN, DIED BECAUSE OF ME ALSO. SO NOW I HAVE KILLED THREE...

IF THOU DIDST KILL MURASAKI, THEN I DID SEND SIR SUNAMI TO HIS CRUEL DEATH WITH MY SILENCE.

I KNEW IT ALREADY THEN, THAT IT WAS THEE...BUT I DID NOT SPEAK, FOR I WISHED NOT TO SEE THEE DIE.

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'TIS MORE THAN I CAN BEAR.

I WAS BESMIRCHED FROM THE START...BUT YOU, SIR! SUCH THINGS BECOME YOU NOT, YOUR HONOR!

IF ONLY... IF ONLY YOU HAD NEVER SET FOOT IN THIS ACCURSED PLACE...

GYOKUEI.

THOU ART TRULY A GOOD LAD.

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WAAAAAH

KASUGAAAAAA!!

HE HATH A KIND COUNTENANCE, BUT IN SOOTH HE IS LIKE ALL THE REST! THERE IS NOT ONE MAN IN THESE INNER CHAMBERS WHO DOTH NOT DESPISE ME! WAAAH!!

I HATE HIM! I HATE O-MAN, I DO! I HATE HIM!!

OHHH, OHHH, THERE, THERE!

...

NAY, THAT WON'T DO EITHER..

!

!

SO, WILL YOU SLAY O-MAN, THEN?

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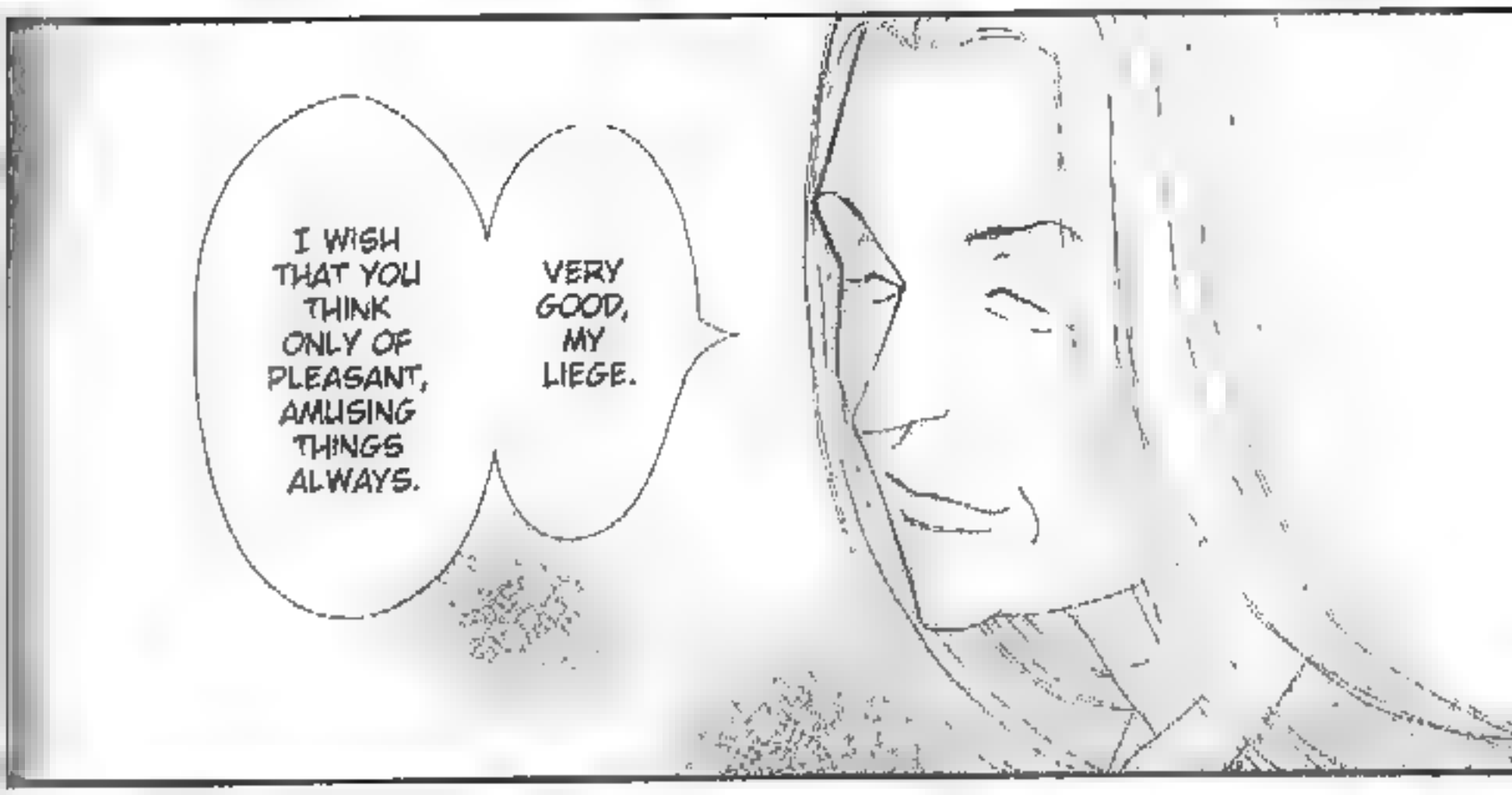
AYE. LET US GATHER ALL THE GROOMS OF THE BEDCHAMBER AND AMUSE OURSELVES A LITTLE.
...HMM.
WELL, THEN, SHALL WE PUNISH HIM? TEACH HIM A LITTLE LESSON?



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AYE, THE COMMAND WAS THAT SIR ARIKOTO MAKE UP HIS FACE, ATTACH THAT LONG TRESS TO HIS HAIR, AND APPEAR IN FRONT OF OUR LORD WEARING THE COSTUME SUPPLIED...

TRESS...?

WHAT IS THIS?

'TIS A LADY'S ROBE! SIR ARIKOTO IS TO PRESENT HIMSELF TO HER HIGHNESS WEARING *THIS*?!

'TIS NOT BY MY MINE OWN CHOICE THAT I SPEND MY DAYS HIDING INSIDE THESE INNER CHAMBERS, GARBED LIKE A MAN AND LIVING LIKE A PRISONER, OR INDEED A PHANTOM!!

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PRITHEE TELL OUR LIEGE THAT I MOST GRATEFULLY ACCEPT THE FINE ROBE AND SHALL PRESENT MYSELF ANON.

WHAT SHALL BE YOUR RESPONSE, SIR ARIKOTO? 'TIS A MOST...

I SHALL DOT, OF COURSE.

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I SAY, DANCE!!
NOW GET UP AND DANCE!!
ESPECIALLY SAWAMURA DEN'EMON, IN THE BACK!! THOU ART QUITE A BEAUTY, THOU ART! THIS GARB DOTH SUIT THEE WELL!!
LOOK AT THEM!! HOW FUNNY THEY ARE, KASUGA!
...
HEE HEE...

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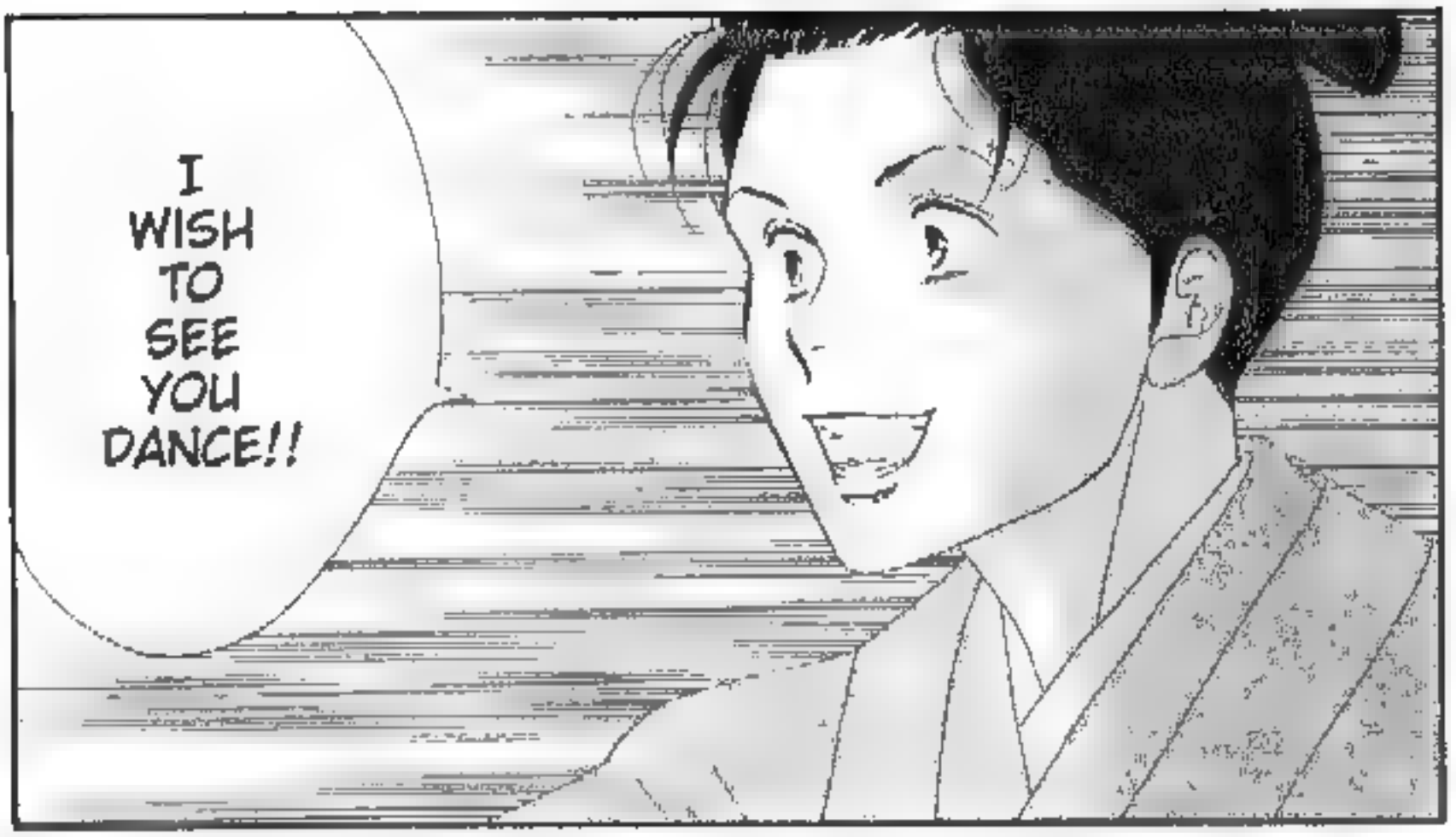

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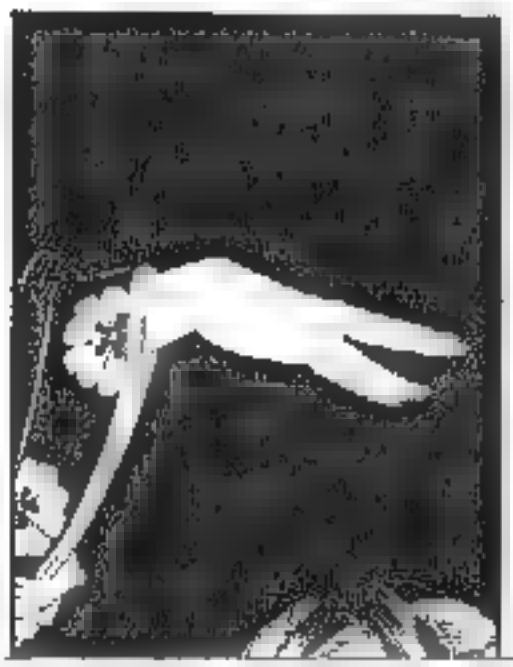

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EIGHTEEN...

NINE-
TEEN.

TWENTY!

AYE, CHIE, I WAS WATCHING THEE. THOU ART SO CLEVER WITH THE BALL.

DID YOU SEE? I DID BOUNCE IT TWENTY TIMES. DID YOU SEE ME?

MOTHER!

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OH, OH... MY DEAR CHIE!

I DO LOVE THEE, TOYO!

YOU ARE LOVELY LIKE SHE WAS, DEAR CHIE, AND INDEED SURE TO BECOME A GREAT BEAUTY LIKE LADY MURASAKI ONE DAY, FOR YOU DO MUCH RESEMBLE MY LADY YOUR MOTHER.

IN SOOTH? OH, TOYO!

THE CHILD MURASAKI WAS PLAYING OUTSIDE, LIKE YOU ARE, WHEN SHE CAUGHT PRINCE GENJI'S EYE

.YOUNG MURA-SAKI...

MURA-SAKI?

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TOKYO!!

SCWISH

Flee, Chie, hurry!

gwip

...

OHH...!!

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MY MOTHER HATH TOLD ME THAT MY FATHER IS THE LORD OF A DISTANT DOMAIN...

WHO ART THOU...?

'TIS MOST CERTAIN THAT YOU ARE THE CHILD OF THE SHOGUN, LORD IEMITSU...!!

YOU ARE SO LIKE HIM...!!

AH, YOUR BROW...YOUR MOUTH... JUST LIKE YOUR FATHER'S!

MOTHER?!

COME, LET US NOT TARRY!

BUT WHERE IS MY MOTHER?!

COME, COME, LET US BE ON OUR WAY.

MOTHER!

MOTHERRRR!!

MOTHER!!

LET ME GO! MOTHER!!

NAY!! WHERE IS MY MOTHER?! THAT WAS HER VOICE THAT WE JUST DID HEAR!

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WAAAAH, WAAAH!

WAAAAAH!!

WAAAAAH!!

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HOLD HER SECURELY, DEN'EMON!
I BEG YOUR PARDON FOR THIS, LADY CHIE. PRAY BE QUIET!
NAAAAAAAY!!
NOW, THEN. FROM THIS MOMENT HENCE. YOUR NAME IS NO LONGER LADY CHIE! YOU WILL TAKE YOUR FATHER'S PLACE AND HENCEFORTH BE KNOWN AS LORD IEMITSU!
NAAAAAAAY!!
KAWAA
SOMEBODY HELP ME!!
WHY?!
BUT WHY?!
HELP ME!!

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HOW NOW, THOU VALET THERE!
FIE UPON THEE, KASUGA! THOU SAYEST I MAY NOT GO BEYOND THE FIRST WING, BUT DRESSED LIKE THIS, I CAN GO WHEREVER I LIKE!
HEH, HEH, 'TWAS SIMPLE ENOUGH!

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BUT WHEREFORE A WENCH, HERE?! WHO ART THOU...?

A WENCH?!

LET ME GO...!!

HELP ME, SOME-BODY!!

LOOKING THE WAY THOU DOST, 'TIS PLAIN THAT THOU WISHEST TO KEEP IT HIDDEN THAT THOU BE'ST A WENCH. IS'T NOT SO?!

PSST, QUIET!! IF THE OTHER MEN HEAR THY SCREAMS, THEY WILL COME RUNNING—AND 'TWILL ONLY MEAN THAT THOU BECOMEST THE PLAYTHING OF A HORDE!!

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME I HAD A WENCH...? STRUGGLE NOT, AND STAY QUIET, AND I'LL GIVE THEE A RIGHT GOOD SCREWING.

HFF!

WELL, WHATEVER THY WISHES MAY BE 'TWAS A STROKE OF GOOD LUCK FOR ME TO COME ACROSS THEE. MMM, A WENCH IN THE INNER CHAMBERS!

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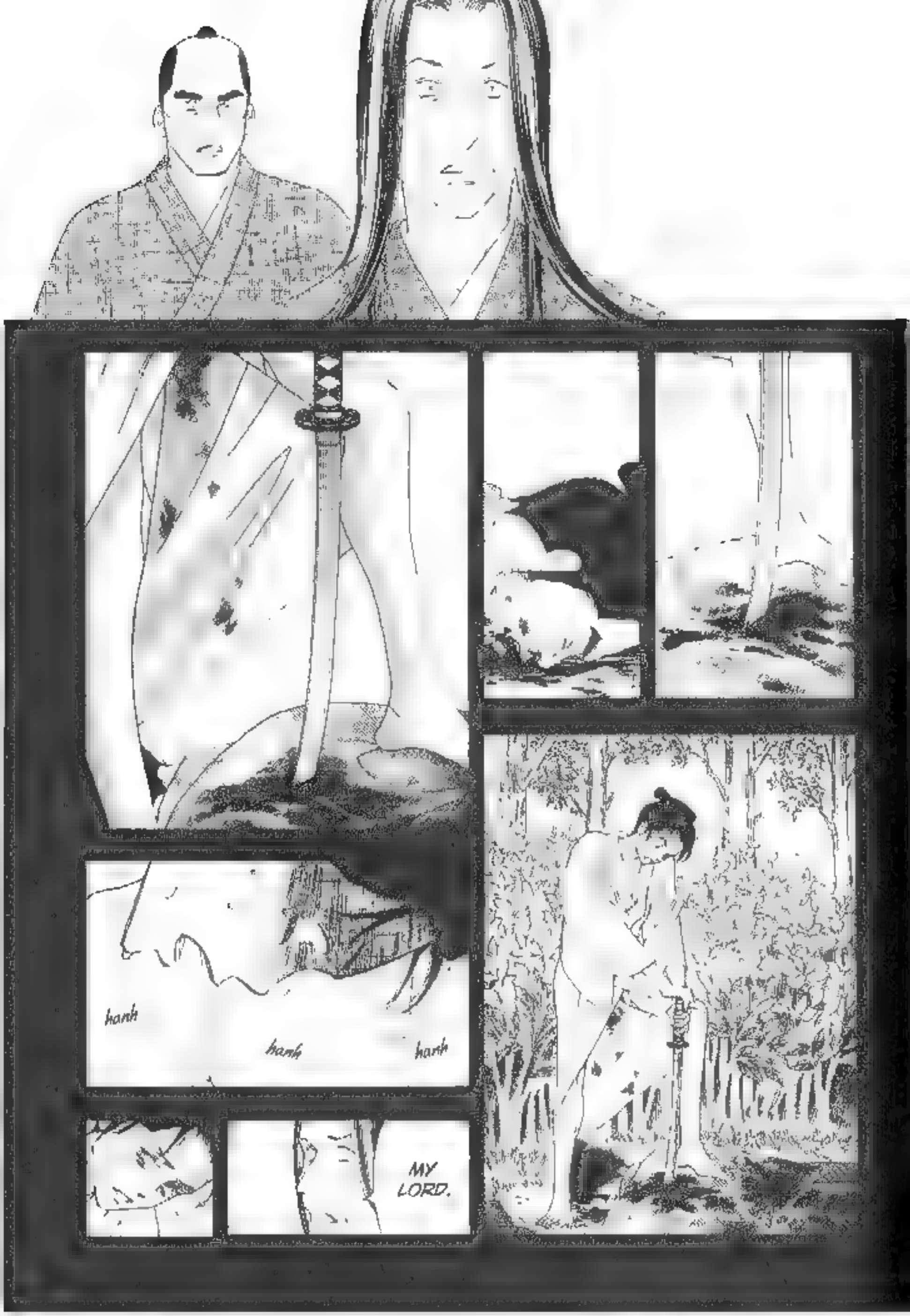

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MY LORD...

OH...I DID AMUSE MYSELF AWHILE WITH THIS FELLOW, BUT HE WAS SO CLUMSY AND UNCOUTH, AND DID CAUSE ME PAIN TO BOOT, THAT I SLEW HIM AFTERWARD.

MY LORD!!

THAT IS ALL...

THAT IS ALL!!

I AM THE SHOGUN, AM I NOT?! THIS KNAVE DID INJURE THE PERSON OF THE SHOGUN!! AND SO I DID SLAY HIM, AS HE WELL DESERVED!!

I WANT IT NOT!!

I WANT IT NOT.

BUT... NAY.

I WANT IT NOT.

..I? AM WITH CHILD?

SURELY NOT.

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NNNNNGH!!

MMMMMGH!!

NOW PUSH, MY LORD. BEAR DOWN WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT.

Nnnn

THE BABE SUCKS NOT MY TEAT.

...

I HAVE A DAUGHTER.

LOOK, KASUGA.

KASUGA!!

WHAT SHALL I DO, KASUGA?! SHE WANTS NOT MY MILK!!

SHE DOTH NOT DRINK?!

WHY DOST THOU NOT DRINK?!

SUCK THE TEAT!!

DRINK!!

WHY DOST THOU NOT?!

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SHAME ON ME, THAT I HAD FIRST TO EXPERENCE SUFFERING AND HARDSHIP MYSELF IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND.

HOW COULD I HAVE SAID SUCH HEARTLESS THINGS TO THIS MOST FRAIL AND FRAGILE LADY?

'TIS QUITE SURE, THAT SHE HATH BEEN STRUCK BY BLOW AFTER BLOW OF MISFORTUNE AND HARDSHIP AND CRUELTY, ERE THIS. 'TIS CLEAR THAT SHE HATH HAD HER WOMANHOOD TRAMPLED UPON AND CRUSHED...!

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URGH...

HOW BEAUTIFUL... HE LOOKETH NOT AT ALL LIKE A MAN.

I VERILY THOUGHT 'TWAS A REAL DAMSEL...!

MY LORD!!

ENOUGH WITH THE LOT OF YOU. OUT, OUT, GET OUT!

...AARGH!

THOU COMEST, AND THE MERRIMENT IS GONE. 'TIS ALWAYS THUS.

...

WELL, I MUST SAY...

NOBODY WOULD GUESS WHICH OF THEM IS THE WOMAN!

SHH!

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AND THOU, O-MAN!! GET OUT! HAST THOU NOT HEARD ME?!

MY LORD!

THOU TOO, KASUGA. OUT!! I WISH TO BE ALONE!

WHEREFORE DOST THOU NOT GO?! I DID COMMAND THEE TO GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!!

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I TOLD THEE TO STAY AWAY!!

SHWA

SHWA

APPROACH ME NOT!!

ALL MY LIFE, I HAD BELIEVED THAT I WAS BORN INTO THIS WORLD TO BECOME A PRIEST.

I WANTED TO HELP THE MANY PEOPLE ENDURING HARDSHIP AND SUFFERING IN THIS WORLD, AND HAD LIVED MY LIFE WITH THE BELIEF THAT I COULD

AND THEN, WHEN THIS PATH WAS CLOSED TO ME, I ABANDONED MYSELF TO DESPAIR AND DID EVEN ATTEMPT TO RID MYSELF OF HUMAN COMPASSION.

HOW FOOLISH AND BLIND I WAS...!!

WHEREFORE DOST THOU...?!

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AND THAT PERSON, THE ONE I WAS BORN INTO THIS WORLD TO HELP, WAS RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME ALL THIS TIME.

ALL ALONG, SHE WAS RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF ME, REACHING OUT WITH TREMBLING HANDS AND WRITHING WITH AGONY...!!

AH...

ARI...KOTO...

WHY DID I NOT SEE WHAT WAS SO PLAIN? I CAN PROVIDE SUCCOR TO ONE PERSON IN THIS WORLD, AND TO ONE PERSON ALONE.

HOW LOVELY SHE IS...MY LORD AND MASTER.

TWEAK

PRAY CALL ME O-MAN, AS YOU ALWAYS HAVE, YOUR HIGHNESS.

MEOW

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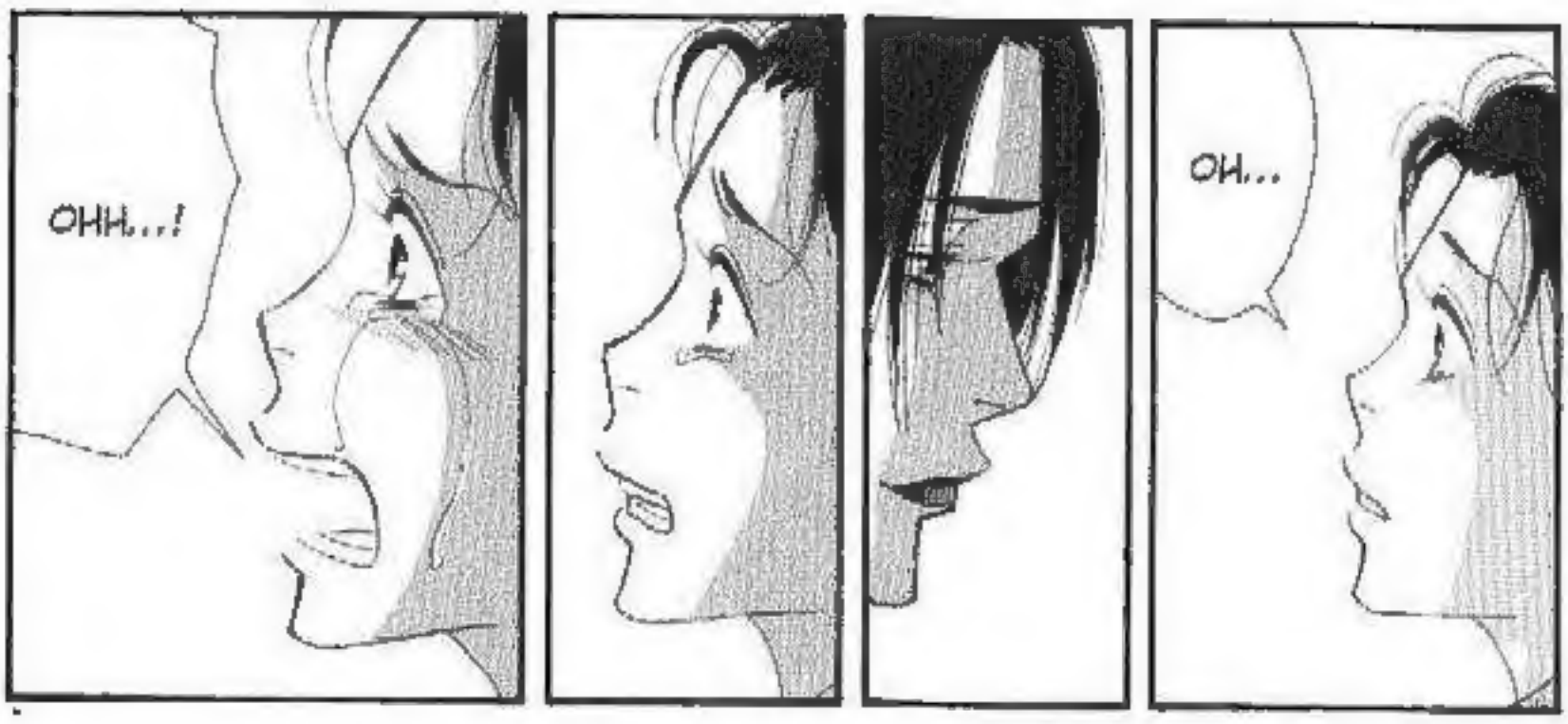

WAAA

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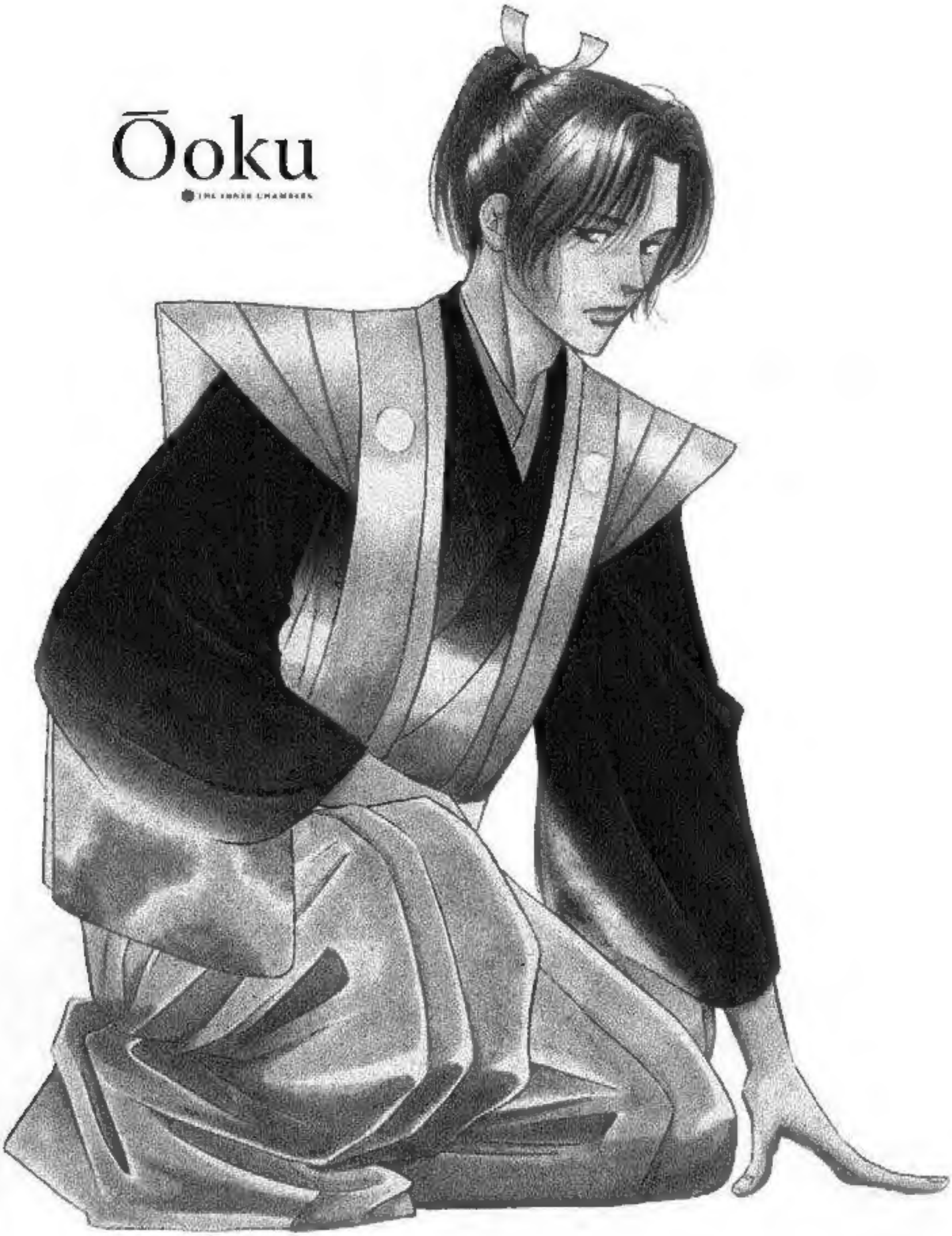
Ōoku

THE INNER CHAMBERS



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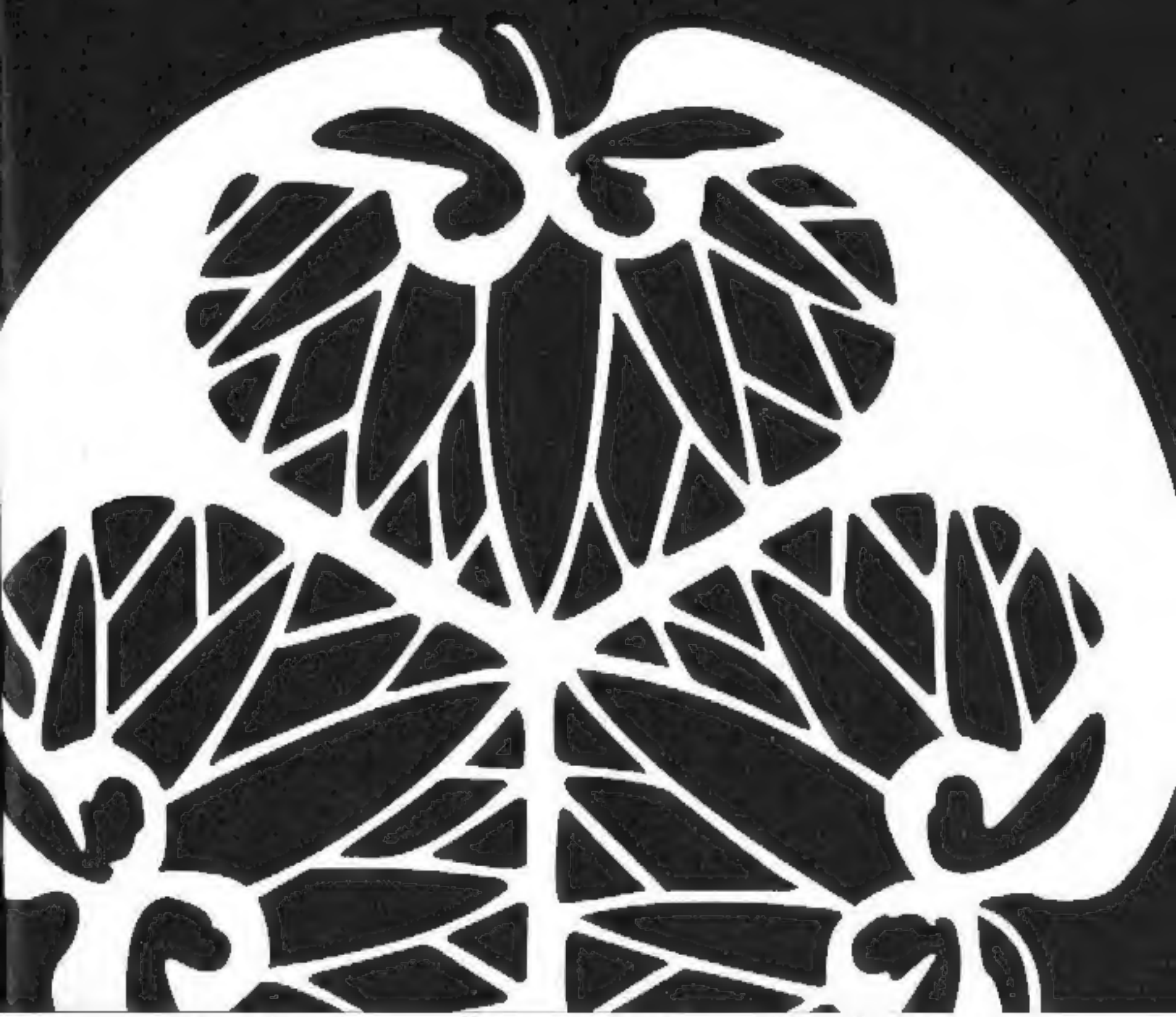
THIS IS THE LAST PAGE.

Ooku: The Inner Chambers has been printed in the original Japanese format in order to preserve the orientation of the original artwork.



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